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IT IS NOT SAFE TO KNOW

by

MRS. BAILLIE REYNOLDS

"Since knowledge is but sorrow's spy
It is not safe to know."

SIR WILLIAM DAVENANT

LONDON
HODDER AND STOUGHTON

The characters in this book are entirely imaginary, and have no relation to any living person

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CHAPTER I

A CHRISTMAS PARTY

ONE of the things which sometimes exasperate me with regard to my sister Bella is her habit of never giving praise when due, though she is always prompt to blame.

As I have to run her house for her, this quality in her is continually rubbing me up the wrong way.

Not that she treats me badly—don't think that for a minute; she is not a bad sort really; but something in her makes her as grudging of approbation as a miser is of his gold.

For the past five years I have lived at Savileas, year in, year out. As most people know, to run a fairly big house with a numerous staff is no bed of roses nowadays; but at least it gives me a vocation and a roof over my head; which is more than many middle-aged widows have; and so little demand is made upon my intellect that I am able to live my own secret life in peace. In spite of her despotic rule, Bella is only tenant for life of this expensive and hideous house and park.

Bella's surname is Owen—Mrs. Owen. Her late husband's first name was Isaac, a fact which she does not care to stress. She and I are both widows and both childless; but we have a joint nephew and niece —our sister's children—Teddie and Trix as we call them; otherwise Edward Isaac and Beatrix Rebekah Owen, to whom the Savileas estate and revenue will revert by their uncle Isaac's will.

The tale begins at the end of December, last year. I had been busy for a week getting the place ready for the return of the family.

Mrs. Owen spent all the autumn in Brighton. She is not imaginative, and her desires don't soar beyond a comfortable hotel at a southern watering-place and, with the money to roam the world, she is content to "stay put"—a fact which shows how unlike sisters can be! Teddie is at Oxford—Brazenose, to be exact. He goes in for muscle, not learning, is in his college eight, and is also what is known as air-minded, which causes Bella a certain anxiety. Trix had spent most of the year at Buda Pesth, studying—or so she said—in the company of friends. They were all now on their way home. Very sensibly, the late Mr. Owen left each of the two young people an adequate allowance, so that they are fairly independent—an arrangement which lessens friction enormously. If Bella held the purse-strings, there would be constant vociferous straining at the leash, because, broadly speaking, neither of the two young Owens like the things their aunt likes, or desires to go in the way she thinks suitable.

In spite of this, Bella is very fond of them both, and literally adores Teddie. Trix is deeper, and has a set of friends who seem queer not only to my sister but to myself—a set that has its fetishes and temples in Bloomsbury and admires only the grotesque. One of these, a young—or youngish—lady named Melian Argent was expected to arrive that day with Trix. I already knew and did not much like her.

One of the conveniences of modern travel is that hostesses do not, as a rule, have to send to the station to meet their guests. Trix was bringing Melian in her car, and only one of our own cars was requisitioned, being sent to the Baxted aerodrome to pick up Teddie and two flying-friends, his chauffeur bringing back Ted's car and luggage from Oxford by road.

Bella herself had returned home the previous day, so as to be ready to receive them.

I had some trouble with the household arrangements, for we had been carrying out extensive alterations in the great ugly mid-Victorian house, in which the maximum of space seemed to have been used by the architect with a minimum result of convenience and comfort. We have added various new bathrooms, and the resulting necessary redecorations and readjustments were far-reaching.

The staff, who in these days expect a routine as unbroken as that in a hospital or workhouse, had been rather tiresome while the house was upside down, and I was obliged to read the riot act more than once. Fortunately I am one of those lucky people who can get on with their staff. I will not have a housekeeper, I like to be in personal touch with everybody. Still, diplomacy is exhausting, and when all was done, and Bella came home to find everything running smoothly, I did feel that a few words of praise (not to say thanks) might have been in order.

Nothing of the kind was forthcoming.

The tint chosen for the staircase walls was, in her opinion, too light. She had chosen it herself, but still it was my fault. The big windows thrown out in the drawing-room and best bedroom above it, would make the rooms too cold, she was positive. The carpet and curtains in one or two of the reconditioned guest-rooms were deplorable.

I suggested that before scrapping the offending items, we should hear what the young people thought. Bella knew well in her heart that they would approve. She grunted, but shelved her objections for the present.

She was genuinely glad to think that the boy and girl were on their way home, for she easily got dull and looked to them and to me for all her interests in life. Therefore after she had lunched and had her nap, she came downstairs in a pretty good temper and a

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very smart gown, settling herself near the glowing fire in the hall to await their coming.

In Uncle Isaac's day the furniture of the hall consisted of a large sideboard, a hat-stand and a centre table holding directories, time-tables and a variety of newspapers that reminded one of a dentist's waiting-room.

One of Teddie's first reforms had been to sweep away all that, have a Persian carpet spread, and transform the hall into a lounge with screens and deep easy chairs and tea-tables. The coats and hats were relegated to an adjacent lobby, and the place was fairly comfortable, though the high ugly windows gave no view except that of the gravel sweep in front of the house.

Teddie and his friends arrived first, dashing in with a whiff of December air. He was a young man with unruly hair, a hawk nose and rather fine eyes, and he hugged Aunt Bella with gay fondness which pleased her. His two companions were a curious contrast.

Martin Rhodes was young and slim, an Oxonian of Teddie's own year, evidently with kindred tastes—just what one would expect, except that he struck me as a bit on the melancholy side, which was unusual in Teddie's circle.

Ian Blackwood was different. He must have been in his forties, and his face was tanned and deeply lined. Teddie had mentioned that Squadron-Leader Blackwood was a bit of an ace and that he was gratified at his having accepted an invitation. Something in this visitor's face appealed to me curiously. He reminded me of my husband; than which I can pay him no higher compliment.

He did not look at me as though I were just an accessory, his dark eyes lit up as he took my hand. "I've heard a lot about you, Mrs. Zangula," he said.

I smiled. "That's quite odd. Who could have spoken of me to you?"

"My father. He knew Dr. Zangula well. He was Professor of Botany at Lanchester University when your husband was Professor of Oriental Languages."

"Why—of course I remember the name. But your father left Lanchester very soon after I came to live there——"

"Yes. He was given a Chair in London just after Zangula married, but you met him several times, I think." He laughed charmingly. "You know, Zangula was a very unusual man—my father had the highest opinion of him; but he didn't think he would ever marry or, if he did, that he would ever find a woman to suit him. He has told me how deeply in love his friend fell; and he says he shall never forget his own relief when he was introduced to you. Zangula had evidently chosen the one woman in a thousand; but he added that he might have guessed he would make no mistake. His penetration into character was so uncanny."

"Wasn't it?" I cried. "Oh, Squadron-Leader Blackwood, we must talk about this again—Teddie is waiting now to show you upstairs—tea is in half an hour."

We had to separate then, and the young men went off, leaving me in a glow. Nobody at Savileas ever spoke to me of Sidney—my husband. I was supposed to have made a *mésalliance* because I had married what Uncle Isaac called a 'Dago'—a term which in his language signified anyone with foreign blood. As a fact, Sidney's blood was not only foreign; it was partly Asiatic, which was unpardonable. He was considered a calamity by all my next-of-kin.

It had been wonderful to go and live in Lanchester, where he was valued almost as he should have been! The ten years of my married life were so ideally happy

that one felt it could not last. To recall it, in the midst of my duties as co-hostess or chatelaine, was a mixture of pleasure and sharp pain.

I had lost it all—that wide, glorious vista of living, those spacious ideas, those tenets which could not even be named to the Philistine society at Savileas. I had to choke back memories and turn to the world about me—to the door which Dixon, our majestic parlourmaid, had just thrown open, to welcome the two girls whom she was admitting.

Beatrix Owen only just misses being a beauty. She has a charming face framed in light fair hair which curls naturally. If a woman of five and forty may be pardoned for saying so, she is considered very like myself at her age. Her figure is vigorous, her curves are rounded, and her smile is infectious.

"Why, Onnie, how well you look! And how young! I can't think how you do it! Melian, I think you've met my aunt, Mrs. Zangula!"

We were in the middle of affectionate greetings when the Squadron-Leader stepped from behind the tall screen of Spanish leather which hides the staircase from those near the fire.

I left Bella to effect introductions. He gazed with interest at my bonny niece, who had pulled off her hat and greeted him warmly.

After a few minutes he turned to his hostess and remarked that he had never seen so strong a likeness between aunt and niece as between Trix and myself: "More like mother and daughter."

We all laughed. We were three sisters, Bella, I, and Marjorie, who married Uncle Isaac's younger brother Ben, and was the mother of Teddie and Trix, who were thus our own blood relations, and not merely Uncle Isaac's nephew and niece.

Bella said in rather a huffed voice that Trix was always considered very like herself, to which Teddie

untactfully replied: "Bless you, no! She is, as Ian says, just as like Aunt Honor as if she were her daughter! Hallo, Melian! How are you? And how goes Bolshevism these days?"

Melian Argent was so terribly thin that she looked as if a breath would blow her away. Had it not been for her sunken cheeks and hollow eye-sockets, she might have been a pretty girl. I was glad she had not been able to inoculate our Hebe-like Trix with her slimming notions. Trix answered for her:

"Bolshevism? Oh, that's as dead as a door-nail, isn't it, Melian? Higher Thought has surpassed it completely."

Melian sighed. "After all, you know, Karl Marx is so materialistic, isn't he? One passes through him and comes out on the other side——"

"Rather a wonderful feat, surely, if he's so material," mocked Teddie. "But how true! Oh, Melian, how true! You and I may come to see eye to eye, after all."

"I doubt it," said Melian, who evidently did not like being laughed at.

"Take care, Teddie," put in Trix slyly. "Melian has powerful friends! She's going to marry a marvellous man—a Jugo-Slav, whom we met in Buda Pesth. He can walk through solid walls and all kinds of stunts like that! I want to persuade Aunt Bella to ask him down here; it would be such fun!"

"Fun!" said Melian in indescribable tones.

"Anyway," went on Teddie unabashed, "it would be jolly interesting! I second the motion. Auntie, let's ask Melian's fiancé to join the merry throng—it must be pretty mouldy for an engaged girl to come and stay in a house without her boy-friend—eh, what?"

"Suppose," I said, "that we have tea first and talk things over a bit. You have all got to come

upstairs and see the alterations presently. I do wonder how you'll like them? Trix's room of course has been done according to her own orders; but Teddie has yet to set the seal of his approval on things. Aunt Bella doesn't like the staircase and corridors. Says they're too light."

"What do you think, Onnie?" asked Ted. (Onnie has been their name for me since they were quite little.)

"I like light," I said, "and this house has always been a bit too dark for my taste."

This started a discussion, as I meant it to do. Teddie averred that it was an awful house, a hopeless house, one that you could never make tolerable. "Nothing to do with it but to pull it down."

This nettled Aunt Bella, as he well knew it would, and she angrily defended her house, which she herself considered to be all that could be desired.

The sparring between herself and Ted kept the others amused, and I, in my capacity of the one who pours out tea, listened and watched. Two only of the company seemed outside the merriment and banter: Martin Rhodes, the tragedy in whose face struck me afresh each time I looked at him; and my bonnie Trix, who was strangely silent. The young man had carried his cup across the room in order to sit down near her, and somehow she looked as if she had not been prepared for that—or perhaps had been expecting it and was not quite clear how she was going to deal with the situation.

Presently the talk turned on aeronautics—criticism of an air race lately won by a comparatively unknown man, whose name I afterwards remembered to have been Canning. He had snatched the record for something or other from a well-known air-racer, and Teddie said he was almost a match in dare-devilment for Martin Rhodes. Martin snappishly bade him

shut up, but Ted expanded on the subject of reckless folly, and Ian Blackwood backed him up. The Squadron-Leader was himself so doughty an expert that he was entitled to counsel prudence; and he said in so many words that Martin was a madman.

Beatrix looked half puzzled, half in admiration at the moody face of the young man at her side. "He'll calm down," said she dryly. "Let him alone. Rely on the strength of his will to live—he's young."

"Of course," said Bella kindly, "the will to live is so strong in the young."

"Not in me," said Martin promptly. "I don't see any point at all in mere existence. If one could live the life one wished it might be different—but which of us can do that?"

"The life one wishes for?" said Trix musingly. "Well, I don't think I know what I wish. I don't put a bridle on life and a bit in its mouth and say, 'You must and shall go that way!' . . . I'm not sure yet quite what way I wish the future to take. I feel more like laying the reins on its neck and saying, 'Carry on!'"

"Well and good! But for some of us it's too late for that!" rapped out young Rhodes harshly. "Life has harnessed us, good and tight, and is driving us on, willy-nilly—in short, life seems to me a greatly overrated stunt, and an air-crash might be as good a way to end it as any other."

Upon this he was attacked by a regular chorus of dissent from everyone. Ted loudly accused him of posing, and the discussion seemed to wake him up a bit in order to defend himself.

I suddenly thought him much more interesting than he had appeared to be, and I caught Trix's eyes upon him with the same air of surprise—of encountering something she had not known to be there.

Later, when we were all on our way upstairs to look

at the alterations, I remarked to Ted that young Rhodes seemed to have something dreadfully on his mind.

"Poor devil! you bet he has," replied my nephew feelingly. "A woman. He's gone and got engaged to one of the nastiest bits of work I've ever encountered. I don't wonder a bit that he would rather end it all than have to marry her."

"OH, Ted ! How grievous ! Can't anything be done about it ? "

" Don't think so. Got her claws into him all right. Knows her power and uses it."

" But he could break it off."

" He's son and heir of a rich man. She would like it broken off as long as he did it. In fact I take it that's her aim. Any jury in the British Isles would give her fifty thousand pounds damages the moment they set eyes on her. Oh, she's a vamp of the worst kind ! And to look at her—the veriest blue-eyed baby ! She can cry whenever she wants to, like that girl Fanny Burney talks about in her diary—the tears just rolling down like pearls, no red eyes or anything unbecoming. *And talk about a gold-digger !* She'd make a man hand over the eyes out of his head if they had any commercial value. Poor old Martin's the only son. His mother's dead and his father thinks the world of him. I don't know what would happen if he knew ! "

" Oh ! He doesn't know ? "

" No fear. Her father's a retired jockey and runs a pub not far from the Darnley aerodrome. Martin was staying there while he took his first air lesssons. The father is in with her in all her stunts, and as soon as they found out that Martin is a matrimonial catch the leery old chap staged his most effective gambit—getting drunk and beating the helpless beauty ! Bruises and floods of tears—threats of drowning herself. Martin fell for it ! "

" Awful ! " I said sympathetically.

"I want to bring him up to the point of breaking it off while he's here. She's working on him now to take her to Rannow—old Colonel Rhodes' place—and introduce her to his family. So I tell him his Governor'll have to know in any case, and it would be worth heavy damages to get out if it."

"Indeed I should think so—we must do all we can to egg him on——"

"You see, Onnie," said Ted confidentially, "the nicer a chap is, the more likely he is to fall for that kind of fraud. He simply can't believe a girl could look like that and be like—the other!"

"Ted!" cried Trix from the next room, "come along, you old leaden-footed camel! What are you about?"

We had to move on, and no more could be said. But I felt uncomfortable when I saw the haunted eyes of young Rhodes. I wondered if the coarse-grained girl who had caught him realized that if driven too hard a man like that might find a way violently to break his bonds.

It was pleasant for me to have my taste commended and my judgment upheld by everybody as regards the decorations I had planned. Bella would have been mortified had it not been for the almost uncanny tact of Ian Blackwood, who persisted in assuming that *she* was responsible jointly with me for it all.

Ted said he would not have thought the old place would respond to treatment in such a way. It made him hope he might not, after all, have to pull it down some day.

"Think twice before pulling it down," was Ian's advice. "After all, it is a house and not a toy—full of good four-square rooms that will hold furniture. I should hate to live in a gim-crack house where you could not even own a wardrobe."

Bella cordially agreed. She was beginning to admire this friend of Ted's enormously, and thought him a most sensible man. She was in such high good humour that Teddie decided it was a favourable moment for suggesting that Melian's boy-friend should be invited. This was instantly agreed to, and I was directed to supplement Melian's letter with a cordial hope from Bella that she might have the pleasure of seeing him.

"His name's Ilianeff," said Melian languidly—"Rudolf Ilianeff."

"And," eagerly put in Trix, "he's really very nice; you'll all like him. He's a secretary in the Jugo-Slav Legation at Buda Pesth, and awfully clever."

"He and Onnie ought to get on like wild-fire," said Ted—"he's a Mahatma, isn't he, or words to that effect?"

"He's a Buddhist, if that's what you mean," said Melian, with quiet contempt.

"A Buddhist!" gasped poor Bella, but nobody paid any attention.

"I sometimes wish," observed Teddie, "that Melian had been born with the vestiges of a sense of humour. But in that case I should have fallen for her, so perhaps it's best as it is."

"I quite agree with you," replied the lady sourly.

"Does she ever smile upon Rudolf?" asked Ted anxiously of his sister.

"You'll see, if he comes," said Trix.

"Oh, he'll come if I say so," affirmed Melian.

"I say, Martin—let's fly to Heston to-morrow and bring him down," Ted suggested.

Martin willingly agreed.

"You'll have to stay here, then, Ian," said Ted. "We cannot do with more than two to give a hand to each in the plane."

"Nothing will please me better—I just feel I want

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to laze in congenial company," replied Blackwood. " I was privileged to know Mrs. Zangula's wonderful husband, and should like to talk to her about him. He was the most exceptional person I ever met. I can't seem to believe that he's dead—a man like that couldn't die."

" What do you mean—couldn't die? " asked Bella impatiently. She doesn't like Sidney to be mentioned, but if her impressive guest admired him so, she might have to reconsider her attitude.

" Mrs. Owen, if Professor Zangula had lived one year longer—lived to finish the book he was writing —his immortality would be beyond question. ' Whom the gods love die young ' seems a very true dictum when one thinks of him. He had every gift—youth, health, beauty, genius——"

" Yes, judging by the portrait in Onnie's room, he was most certainly a good-looker," said Trix, squeezing my hand.

"——and no photo could give you the impression he conveyed," went on Blackwood. " I remember coming across a line in a poem, saying that a certain man's face ' seemed but a lamp to hold a soul.' . . . That was just what one felt about Zangula; and his spirits too. He was no melancholy hermit—no recluse—he filled the place, wherever he was, with his infectious gaiety."

I smiled. This was balm to my spirit. What an unexpected joy to have this flying-man alight at my doors, and for it to turn out that he had known my beloved and was in the ranks of his most stalwart admirers !

As I expected, Bella had had enough of it. She abruptly changed the conversation, but Melian inquired in a low voice of me, " How did he die? "

" Influenza pneumonia," I answered. " He was perfectly well, only over-worked—he had an appoint-

ment to go to a psychological clinic where they treated the very poor—they used to beseech him to go and cast out devils. He felt too unwell to go, but he would not let them down. He cured the man, but took the terrible chill from which he was too exhausted to recover. . . ."

"Why did I never hear of him before—when I was staying here?" cried the girl resentfully.

"He is never mentioned. My sister never forgave me for marrying him . . . and now I ought to go and write to—is he *Professor* Ilianeff?"

"Yes. You see he's an adept. I wonder whether he ever heard of your husband?"

"Maybe not. It is some time since he died . . . but as we are on the subject, may I ask a favour? Please don't mention this—either my husband or his powers—to anyone here, including your fiancé——"

"Oh, but why?"

I hesitated a moment, and then decided to confide in her as the surest way to make her trustworthy.

"I've already told you that Mrs. Owen would dislike it, but that's not all. I myself am the possessor of exceptional powers in the direction of mysticism. I am what they call an adept; but when he was dying, my husband begged me not to practise it. He always said it was profoundly dangerous for one of purely occidental blood to meddle in these oriental mysteries. You see, *he knew it was real.* I have always respected his wish; and you can see how difficult it would be for me to be in the house with this young man—he being as you say an adept—without mixing in it all. It must be quite between ourselves, please. Ian Blackwood knows, and respects my wishes."

"I like the Squadron-Leader," said Melian in her definite way. "And I like you too," she added after a pause.

I laughed. "That's very nice of you. I did not like you at all last time you stayed here."

"I don't wonder. I was a Marxist. I must have been quite unbearable. But you bore with me! I never even knew you disliked me."

"Perhaps it wasn't such a very deep dislike," I teased her. "At any rate it seems to be wearing a bit thin."

Melian sighed. "I am more sensitive now. I believe I should at once be aware of mental antagonism."

"They are things one should not cultivate," I remarked.

"No. I know one should cultivate serenity. Very hard for me—I have always been fretful. Fancy your husband being a Buddhist."

"Oh, but he was not. He was a Christian."

"*What!*" cried Melian, as though I had said he was mentally deficient.

"Yes," I replied. "He became a convert at Oxford. Odd, wasn't it? Many undergraduates lose their faith when they go to the University; but that is because as a rule they have none to lose. Only a bundle of conventions. Sidney came under the influence of one of our great theologians of the English Church. We have them, you know, though it is the fashion now to talk of the Catholic faith as something that is entirely dead except in the Roman Communion. He was baptized on his twenty-first birthday; both his parents were willing that he should obey his own conscience in the matter. His mother had never had any very settled faith, or I suppose she would not have married his father. She was the daughter of an Oxford Professor."

"And have you a settled faith?" asked Melian, staring at me as at a freak of nature.

"I hope so," I answered her with a smile, rising

with determination. "You must write at once if you are to catch this evening's post," I told her.

"Anyway, you've got all the serenity of the Buddhist cult," she remarked as we went upstairs together. "How anybody could stand Mrs. Owen as you do—— Oh, I beg your pardon, I quite forgot she's your sister——"

I laughed. "Don't undervalue her," I said. "Her faults are mostly on the surface. Try to look beneath."

"That's just what Rudolf tells me! He says I'm so superficial!"

"Yet he loves you?"

"He says he loves me for my faults," she murmured.

I wondered, and called myself a complete cynic, because I could not help reflecting that Melian has five hundred a year, and that's a useful little sum for one's wife to possess. However, I had not seen the young man in question, so I suspended judgment.

When I emerged from my room, having written my note on Bella's behalf, I met Beatrix coming along the corridor with Martin at her side. She had on her hat and furs.

"Handover your epistle, Onnie," said she. "Martin and I are going to post. We've collected Melian's share of the invitation and we both want a quick run before dressing for dinner."

I saw with pleasure that Martin looked slightly more cheerful. He had not been to Savileas before, but I knew Trix had met him when she was at Oxford. That was at a time when we all thought she would marry a friend of Ted's called Biddle. However, the affair came to nothing; he was not up to standard, and I was glad my girl decided against him. I handed over the note, and the pair went off, discussing ski-ing as they went downstairs, and wishing for snow,

as we had quite a good bare hill in the neighbourhood which could be used if the snow were only deep enough.

They returned with small margin of time for dressing before dinner, nevertheless Trix looked very sweet when she darted into the hall just as Dixon, my senior parlourmaid—my she-butler, as Ted calls her—announced that we were served.

When we women went into the drawing-room afterwards, Trix slipped a hand into my arm. "I want to tell you something, Onnie." Her dropped voice suggested a confidence.

I went to preside over the coffee-tray. "Well?" I said, "we are out of earshot here, I think, and they are all talking, so carry on."

"This afternoon," said she, "when Fanny came to unpack for me I asked for the village news, and she told me poor little Alfie Bennett had had another bad turn."

(I ought to mention that Alfie is the only child of Mr. and Mrs. Bennett, who were both in service here formerly and now keep the Savile Arms in Savileas, our village. Mrs. Bennett used to be Trix's nurse, and the delicacy of their only child is a great trouble to the excellent couple.)

"Oh," I said, "I hadn't heard about Alfie——"

"No, and I knew you'd want to hear the latest news of him, so, after we had posted the letters, I told Martin if he didn't mind I would like to go in to the inn and inquire. Martin agreed, and said he thought a glass of sherry would be in order for both of us. In we went, and I ran upstairs while Martin was invited into the parlour and Bennett insisted upon being our host for the sherries. I found Alfie much better, playing with his soldiers, out of bed, though still confined to his room. So I had a chat with him and his mother and then came down. In the passage

just by the door of the Private Bar, a man was standing, looking into the parlour, which has a glass door with a curtain over it. He was peeping through rather furtively, and gave a start as I came up behind him. I think he took me for a village girl in the dim light, and he said, 'Beg pardon, Miss, but who's the chap in there talking to the landlord?' This made me feel a bit stiff, and I said in an offhand way, 'Why do you want to know?' He looked rather awkward, and answered in a different tone, 'Because I think I know him, but I'm not quite sure.' 'You had better inquire of Mr. Bennett,' I told him coolly, opened the parlour door and went in. We didn't stay long, because I knew we had no time to spare; we just drank our wine, said we were glad Alfie was mending, and of course I told Bennett who Martin was and also that we had Squadron-Leader Blackwood staying with us here. 'Oh,' said Bennett, 'we hear news from the aerodrome nowadays. One of the Instructors from there comes over here on his motor-bike sometimes, just for variety. Says it's mighty dull at Baxted.' We agreed that it would be dull, and took our leave. As we went out, the man who had spoken to me was standing with his drink in his hand near the entrance. He said nothing, but stared hard at Martin, who took no notice of him; but when we were a short distance away Martin remarked to me, 'That's odd! That chap by the door is one of the instructors from Darnley 'Drome. Wonder what he's doing here? Unpleasant kind of fellow, Finnegan by name. Thinks himself too good for his job.'"

This rather startled me, in view of what Ted had told me; but I recollected that Trix knew nothing of Martin's Darnley entanglement.

"Perhaps the man's left Darnley and got a job at Baxted."

"Let's hope not, for Martin evidently doesn't like him. I didn't either. He looked like a gentleman gone to pieces," said Trix reflectively.

We had no more time for *tête-à-tête* talk, there were plans for the morrow to be discussed. Teddie and Rhodes decided definitely to fly to Heston and bring back Ilianeff. The others wanted to ride—that is, Trix and Blackwood. We have mounts in the stable, for both Ted and Trix love hunting, but there was no meet on the following day. The plan left out Melian, who loathes and execrates hunting, shooting and all such sports, but she declared she would be quite happy left at home with me.

Plans arranged, we sat down to contract, Bella being very fond of it, though unluckily a bad player. Ian Blackwood is good, and I am fairly reliable, but Ted is freakish and an incurable over-bidder. He cut partners with his elder aunt so Ian and I were easy winners. Martin, Trix and Melian went up to the billiard-room, and I felt glad we were inviting the boy-friend, as our party would balance better.

The following day was favourable as regards weather: a grey, windless December day, not very cold. Visibility was poor, but there was no fog.

The two Oxonians went off betimes in the car to Baxted to pick up their 'plane, and I was left to a somewhat busy day. Melian in her new-found admiration for me made herself quite helpful, and in return was invited into my sanctum and shown my wonderful portrait of Sidney, painted by a brilliant young artist who owed a great deal to my husband's influence.

The car brought back the two young men and our new guest in good time for dinner, and I was interested in my first sight of Ilianeff. He was distinctly handsome, rather Italian in type. I had never before seen

a Jugo-Slav, so supposed his eye-setting and cheek-bone to be characteristic of that race; otherwise I should have suspected him of oriental blood. His manner was good, quiet and easy. Yet I knew at first sight that I neither liked nor trusted him.

CHAPTER III

ILIANEFF THE ADEPT

THE greeting between the betrothed pair was fully as modern as I expected it to be. Neither displayed any kind of emotion. In fact, Melian did not strike me as being in love. I fancied that she had accepted Ilianeff only because she was not as a rule popular with men, and to be engaged increased her self-respect.

The young man's evident admiration of Beatrix was in somewhat noticeable contrast to his cavalier salutation of his lady love. Of course Beatrix was in a sense his hostess; but somehow his changed face when he shook hands with her brought strongly to my mind my uncharitable thought concerning Melian's five hundred a year. He may have surmised that Trix had far more than that; which impression would certainly be confirmed by his visit to her home. In these days, when even marriage hardly constitutes a barrier to our advanced youth, the breaking of an engagement means just nothing at all.

I felt annoyed on Trix's behalf. This young adventurer would certainly marry her if he could; and Martin, whom I much preferred, in his old-fashioned idea of honour, believed himself tied to a hopeless misfit!

When it was almost time to go down to dinner, Ted slipped into my sitting-room and knocked on my bedroom door.

"I say," he said as soon as I appeared, "what do you think? That foul vamp of Martin's has sent over one of her creatures to spy on him. He's an air

instructor from Darnley, and he's collared a job at Baxted."

"That's annoying; but Baxted's a good way off from here. You must find somewhere else to keep the 'plane. If you take it away there will hardly be the least likelihood of his ever setting eyes on Martin, will there?"

"The dirty spy was here in Savileas yesterday evening and saw Martin and Trix together. Bennett told Martin he comes over pretty frequently on a motor-bike. Martin is positive there'll be trouble. He'll report, and our lovely Melisande will show signs of life."

"Melisande?"

"Oh yes. Melisande Lebreton is her name—or so she says. No doubt her father was born otherwise. I've heard he was warned off the turf under his earlier name of Pumps. Anyhow, he now runs his pub as J. Lebreton."

"If it comes to a breach of promise, that would be a fact in Martin's favour, wouldn't it?"

"I should think so; and, if we could find that this air-instructor Finnegan has been paid by the Lebretons to come here, that would be another point. Anyway, poor old Martin is down in the depths again. He seemed to be cheering up when he had been here a few hours, but he was wild after seeing that skunk at the 'Drome."

"I don't wonder," I murmured sympathetically. "What kind of person is Finnegan?"

"The most poisonous type of all—born a gentleman, and gone wrong. The remains of good looks. Has evidently been pretty thick with Melisande in former days, so would have double motive for doing her dirty work for her. They could marry and live very comfortably on what the Court awarded her for breach."

Ted hunched his shoulders and loitered round my

room with eyes that saw nothing outward. Presently he burst forth: "You know it's conspicuously damnable, because I feel sure that Martin and Trix are getting off together."

"Oh! You see signs of it?"

"Well, you know up at Oxford he was fearfully taken with her, but we all thought then that she was going to click with that biological chap, Professor What's-his-name. Martin sheered off in gloom and went to Darnley for his course, and by the time Trix had sent the biologist packing, the harm was done: the silly blighter had gone in over his head."

"I wonder he came here."

"It wasn't easy to persuade him. But now he's seen Trix again—tasted blood, you might say—you couldn't prise him off it with a chisel."

I sat down, reflecting.

"What do you make of it, Teddie? Is Martin adequate—good enough for our girl?"

"Oh well, Onnie, if you say good enough . . ."

"I know. Nobody is. But is Martin such a fool as his blunder would lead one to suppose?"

"Good Lord, no! He's no fool. He's easily the best chap I know."

"I see. You want me to help if I can—is there anything to be done about it?"

He nodded. "Think it over."

I said, "My advice to him would be to break it off and pay up, to almost any extent."

"His pater's not exactly a Croesus," sighed Ted. "Besides, you see, he doesn't a bit know yet whether Trix is reciprocating or not. He's the most modest chap on earth, and he very likely thinks that if his present trouble is dragged into the light of day, his goose would be cooked as far as Trix is concerned. His ideas, as you may by now have gathered, are somewhat out of date."

I smiled. "Trix is certainly the more modern of the two."

Teddie once more wandered round the room. "Look here, Onnie. You have the flair for these things. You know . . . it's difficult to put into words. What I mean is that one feels so differently about things—anything—if one is really what you call in love. I never have been—don't think I'm likely to be—but I'm not altogether without sympathy for others; in fact, as you know, my nature is full of these lovable traits. So, as I say, if you think that Trix is in danger of—of really falling for Martin—just tip me off—eh? I'm not quite an ass—that is, like the man in the play, I'm not a *silly* ass—and I think I might be useful to them both. I was under the impression till yesterday that Trix is a long way off that stage at present . . . but you never know. Sometimes these things mature quickly, and all I say is, keep me informed."

I nodded thoughtfully.

He blurted out suddenly, "What price Melian's boy-friend?"

"Oh, Ted! Are you there? If so, you arrived telepathically! Now listen, comrade. What I am now going to say is on the Us-two basis strictly. *Entendu?*"

"*Entendu*," he replied at once. Since his school-days Ted and I have had our secrets on the "us-two" basis, which means exactly us two and nobody else.

"Very well. On that understanding I tell you that I suggest young Ilianeff has made up his mind to try for Trix and her fortune, and is here with that intent. Don't tell me the same idea occurred to you."

"To me it sticks out a mile," said Ted.

"I agree, you're not a silly ass," I told him with relish. "By the way, Ted, did you effectually

impress upon your friends that nothing was to be said to Ilianeff about Uncle Sidney?"

He smiled. "I rubbed it in well, I think. I told Blackwood and Martin that he had been a great man—a genius—but he had never given any kind of display nor exploited his wonderful gifts for money, and that you were frightfully touchy about it and had ordered me to get their promise not to mention him or his powers."

I nodded. "Good man! I myself have told my wishes to Melian, who is unexpectedly tractable, having developed a kind of pash for me in her sudden way. Moreover, I understand she is going through a course of instruction or initiation, or whatever you like to call it, at Ilianeff's hands, and would be anxious to keep off anything that savoured of rivalry to him."

"And he's poison to Aunt Bella—I mean Uncle Sidney is—so *she* is dead certain to hold her tongue."

I nodded. "Yes, I hope we are safe, and I shall hold myself in readiness to intervene if necessary—for example, if the young man tries on any hypnotic stunts with our Trix."

"He'd better not," muttered Ted ferociously.

On that the gong pealed and we went down to dinner. Trix was standing on the hearth-rug, and she looked so beautiful that I caught my breath as I entered the room. She wore a daffodil-yellow gown which suited her skin and golden hair to perfection. The leaping flames turned it into the colour of fire and shone through her curls. Facing her was the boy-friend, as Ted persisted in calling Ilianeff. His handsome olive face was alive with admiration.

Melian sat on a settee with Ian Blackwood, who was making conversation very pleasantly with her. She wore a shabby, somewhat crumpled frock of a disagreeable shade of bronze, highly unbecoming to

her, in my opinion; but I knew enough about the course of discipline which she was going through to be aware that such a dress was appropriate to the follower of a *guru* such as her fiancé claimed to be.

There was no talk at dinner of occultism or any kindred subject. Ilianeff sat on one side of Bella, Ian Blackwood on the other. Only the lightest of subjects were discussed, and everyone was in such high spirits that Martin's depression, though visible to Ted and me, escaped without notice.

The first notes of the overture, as Ted afterwards called them, did not sound until dinner was over and we were all standing about in the hall drinking coffee and dividing up into bridge and billiard-parties. The bell rang, and Noel Gardner was ushered in, to be warmly greeted by the young people.

He is a bachelor of about my own age, possessed of moderate private means, and with a passion for training young men in the way in which he thinks they should go. Having himself been through the Great War, he is strongly of opinion that every man in a democratic country should be trained to help in defence of his native land. He has a tremendously popular Club in the village, takes his lads into camp every summer, and boasts a membership far exceeding the bounds of our village of Savileas. We are on the direct 'bus route from Baxted, and the youth from thence pour out every Club night in numbers which are most flattering to the popularity and influence of the man who runs the show.

Ted and Trix were very pleased to see him, and at once introduced him to Melian, Ilianeff, Blackwood, and Rhodes. Major Gardner—to give him his full style and title—responded heartily to his welcome, but when he was presented to Ilianeff, his face broke into a broad smile of delighted appreciation.

"Ilianeff?" he cried. "Surely not the great Professor Ilianeff of the Orient Light Society?"

Ilianeff looked suitably modest and unassuming, while admitting that he was Vice-President of the society in question.

"Well, then," said Noel, accepting coffee and a cigarette and subsiding into a chair near me, "I really believe that you are a direct answer to prayer!"

"How so?" asked Ilianeff, with his charming smile.

"I came here to-night with a kind of S.O.S., aimed at my good friends the young Owens and Mrs. Zangula! As they will tell you, I run a Lads' Club which is, I fear, a bit of an obsession with me. I want to hold a social evening with some special inducement, something that will attract a large audience, so as to provide funds for our A.R.P. department. Savileas must be in the van of the country, of course, and our training-classes have been well attended. But we want more material, and I don't think I ought to be expected to provide it all."

"Certainly not, Noel," said Bella graciously. "I'll give you a subscription."

"You shall help by taking tickets—lots of tickets—for our show," he said delightedly. "And if by some wonderful bit of good luck Professor Ilianeff . . . How long are you staying down here, Professor?"

"Well," said Ilianeff, somewhat embarrassed, "I don't know how long my most kind hostess expects to be burdened with me——"

"Oh, of course," put in Bella, who had been much taken with the handsome fellow, laying himself out to be agreeable to her during dinner—"as far as we are concerned, stay as long as it suits you."

"Excellent!" cried Noel, quite excited; "but I haven't yet put the vital question—Would you be willing to give us the great pleasure of seeing some of

your wonders?—it was at the Middlesex Super-Technical I think I saw you—a most astonishing programme, sir! Could I dare to ask . . ."

"You'll help him, won't you, Rudolf?" asked Melian casually as she broke off her ash into a tray.

"Why — but surely — somebody more illustrious——" Rudolf deprecated his own attainments, and a lively interchange of compliments resulted.

I was amused. This promised to be very entertaining. Of course there was risk. If Ilianeff was out to influence Trix, and if he once started on the hypnotic lines in which he was evidently an expert, there might be danger. However, I should be on the spot, and as Ilianeff suspected nothing and evidently looked upon me as a poor relation, occupying a salaried situation in my wealthy sister's household, I was in an advantageous position. Also, as I looked at Martin I thought it might be stimulating to him if Ilianeff should make the very slightest attempt to capture the mind of Trix. I could imagine how he would fire up! Such a contingency might force him to understand himself and to realize that the bonds of Melisande must be broken.

I watched him as he was then sitting, his eyes on Trix, who was standing in all her beauty in front of Noel Gardner, with whom she was a prime favourite.

"By Jove, our Beatrix!" said Noel; "but you are easy to look at, as our U.S.A. cousins have it! Where have you been, what have you done, to make yourself so resplendent? You were always first in my heart, but to-night you make me feel like a knight in the lists, ready to joust against all comers."

Trix laughed in the careless, casual way in which the girls of this generation accept tribute. "Glad you're pleased, Father Christmas! Shall I emulate the fair ladies of the times to which you allude, by sitting and watching the combat, and becoming the

prize of the one who has succeeded in bumping off his unlucky opponent?"

I saw Martin look furtively at Ilianeff. I glanced at Ted, and he closed one eye. Evidently he was of my opinion that this thing might prove interesting, and I was not to throw cold water.

There followed an animated discussion between Major Gardner and Ilianeff as to what was required and what could be arranged for the Village Hall. Bella soon put in her oar. It delighted her to see the occult thus reduced to the level of conjuring tricks, and I am sure she expected some kind of protest from me. Had she known it, I was even more anxious than she that no one should suspect me of being anything like an adept. Laying down her work, she said impressively that the Village Hall would be too small for the occasion. If the object of the show was to make money, why not the New Baxted Coronation Hall? She was always willing to help Noel's Club, and would be glad and willing to pay the fee for hiring. This handsome offer excited Noel tremendously. An enterprising garage proprietor in Baxted always ran a motor-coach to and from Savileas when there was anything on at the Coronation Hall likely to attract an audience. All the villagers would go.

"It would have to be properly advertised," suggested Ian Blackwood.

Noel said proudly that the advertising would present no difficulty, because the Club was the owner of a small printing-press, and was able to accept orders for the simpler kinds of bill-posting. This led naturally on to the consideration of what should be announced in the bills. There would be none too much time for preparation, and forthwith the organizers sat down at a table and began to fix the date and to draft such an advertisement as should tempt

the natives. Melian, deeply gratified at having her Rudolf thus the centre of attraction, took an interested part in the deliberations.

Martin and Trix drew away unnoticed, and chatted in low tones. Ted and I stood near, between the withdrawn couple and Ilianeff, so that he could not see them, and gave our approval to the whole scheme.

Bella submitted with some anxiety a further point. Surely so clever an artist as Professor Ilianeff should be paid a high fee? It was fine to see Rudolf bristle with noble scorn.

If he could in any way help on a good work in a village community, it would be his pride and privilege —moreover it might form some slight acknowledgement of his appreciation of his charming hostess's hospitality!

Everyone was so impressed that Martin and Trix sank into the background, until Rudolf, glancing round to see what effect his nobility made upon the one person whom it was designed to please, discovered that she had not so much as heard what was the point at issue!

CHAPTER IV

ENTER MELISANDE

NEXT day I had to go over to Baxted for some rather extensive catering for my large family. Bella had decided upon a state dinner-party, which would certainly be helpful in advertising the forthcoming entertainment at the Coronation Hall. It was nearly lunch-time when I returned, and I had just taken off my things when Dixon came to the door of my room and said :

"There's a young lady just come, ma'am. She asked for Mrs. Owen, but she's gone down to the hot-houses, and then she asked for Mr. Rhodes, and he's out riding with the rest of them, so I asked her in and said I would fetch you."

"She asked for Mr. Rhodes?" I gasped, assailed by a sudden horror.

"Yes'm. She's a lovely young lady too, ever so well dressed, and she seemed very tired."

"Mercy!" I said faintly. "Just go off, will you, find Mrs. Owen and tell her to come? Are you sure that Mr. Rhodes is out?"

"Oh, quite sure, ma'am. Miss Trix and he were going to have a round of golf, I think——"

"Where have you put her, Dixon?"

"In the morning-room, ma'am, there's a beautiful fire there."

"I'll go down at once," I sighed, taking out a clean handkerchief.

"She came in a car, ma'am—driving herself—a love of a little car," volunteered Dixon, who was evidently much struck by our guest.

I hurried off with a sinking heart; and the moment

I entered the morning-room I knew, without asking a single question, that Miss Melisande Lebreton stood before me.

She was posed on the hearth-rug, her hands held out to the fire, and she turned upon me the full battery of great blue eyes, just not too blatantly made up, a carefully adjusted complexion and some of the curls of a most elaborate ' perm '.

" Oh ! " said she, turning as I came in and showing a very graceful figure—" you are, you must be Mrs. Owen—' Auntie Bella ', as Martin's friend Mr. Owen calls you."

" Sorry," I said dryly, not offering to shake hands and speaking, I am afraid, as stiffly as I felt, " my name is Zangula—Mrs. Zangula. I am Mrs. Owen's sister."

" A-ah ! " she sighed wistfully, " then that spoils my lovely compliment. I was about to say that you were rightly named Bella, you are so beautiful ! "

" But you haven't told me who *you* are, and to what we are indebted for the pleasure of this visit ? "

She seemed a little disconcerted at my blunt rebuff. " I am Melisande," said she reproachfully—" Martin's Melisande . . . you must have heard him speak of me ? "

I shook my head. " I'm afraid not. But please explain. I think you will find that chair comfortable."

She rallied herself and smiled politely as she sat down and loosened her very expensive furs. She was really rather wonderful ! Except for the fact that her manner was just a shade too *empressé*, she might have passed muster—almost——! I suspected her of having undergone careful training—rehearsed her part, so to speak.

" But surely "—she permitted herself to exhibit a

tender, hesitating distress—" Martin told you that I was coming to see him? "

" He certainly did not tell us anything of the kind."

She looked puzzled—wounded. " Perhaps he did not get my letter," she hazarded. " I wrote yesterday."

" Our posts are not good," said I, determined not to help her out, " so I conclude that your letter has not reached him. He has gone for a ride, and after that a round of golf."

" Ah! " she sighed, " then he certainly did not receive my letter. . . . I suppose he will be back to lunch? "

" Probably. I could not say for certain, as we drop in to lunch or not as we feel inclined."

She absorbed this revelation of the modern go-as-you-please with evident interest, mingled with surprise. I was frantically wondering what I could do with her. To get rid of her before Martin came seemed wholly out of the question, but I was deeply opposed to the idea of her meeting Trix if it could be avoided. At this unlucky moment the door opened and Bella came in.

It was my fault, of course; in my first agitation I had sent Dixon to find her. Had I only left it alone I might have been able to show the intruder out! Bella unknowing would have come indoors and proceeded upstairs to make ready for lunch, and Miss Lebreton would have left before it was known that she had ever been here.

My heart sank as Bella's imposing bulk sailed into the room and, with a bow in the stranger's direction, turned to me for explanation.

" This is Mrs. Owen," I said shortly. " Bella, this young lady, whose name I don't know, says she is a friend of Martin Rhodes."

Melisande rose. There were tears in her great blue

eyes and her really lovely mouth quivered. "Oh!" she said, "it is too bad of Martin! I feel so—so ashamed—as if I were intruding—but you know I am engaged to him—we are to be married very soon—and Ted Owen is such a friend of his, and he knows me quite well. I wrote to tell Martin I should be in these parts and would like to call upon you—and it seems he never had my letter, and he has gone out and left me to—to explain myself——"

I recalled Ted's information about this siren; how she could shed tears without reddening her beautiful eyes. She looked, as she stood before my sister, perfectly angelic—hurt and pathetic. I could see Bella thaw under her spell.

"Dear me, how unlucky!" said she kindly. "Our posts here are really most inadequate, and I have complained more than once about it. Curious, I never knew that Martin was engaged, but the young people don't tell the old ones everything. I did not catch your name, Miss——"

"My name is Lebreton," she faltered, "but you must call me Melisande, please; and as Martin has not mentioned that I should be coming, I had better take my leave. I am so sorry I butted in, as Martin would say. I hope I haven't disturbed you."

Naturally this was too much for Bella's sense of hospitality. She protested against immediate departure. She asked whence her visitor had come and where she was going. It appeared that Melisande had driven herself all the way from Darnley that morning and was on her way to visit an aunt, at a place at least forty miles farther.

"Of course you must stay to lunch," my sister said, "we will send your car round to the garage."

Melisande protested beautifully; just not too much. She would be really grateful for some lunch, as she did not much like stopping at an inn when she was

travelling alone. But the car was all right where it was, as she would be on her way again in an hour or so. I rather backed her up in this, as, if the car was out there in plain sight, Martin would see it, doubtless recognize it, and have at least a minute's preparation for the blow about to fall upon him. Bella, however, was firm. She was much taken with Melisande's beauty and elegance, also with the charming little car. They went together to the front door and, as luck would have it, Casson the groom was hanging about there, waiting to take the horses when the riders returned. Mrs. Owen ordered him to run the car round to the stables, and Melisande sent, I thought, a little ray of triumph in my direction as she turned and went indoors again, Bella having drawn her beautifully manicured hand through her arm in great cordiality.

We sat down in the hall for a few minutes, and Bella plied the girl with questions. How long had they been engaged——?

Oh, not long !—Martin had not yet taken her down to Rannow to make the acquaintance of his family—term had only just ended, and Martin had been working so hard for his finals——

She had no mother—lived with her father and kept house for him. Oh yes, he would miss her, no doubt, but he had plenty of friends in Darnley. No, they had not yet decided where to live, only it must be near an airport, for Martin's sake. She did not much care where she lived—" It's the man that counts, not the place; don't you agree, Mrs. Owen?"

By the time the horses were heard outside, Bella was quite captivated. As it happened, the two first to enter were Trix and Martin. They had finished their round and decided not to begin a second, in case of being late for lunch.

They came in on a burst of laughter and something

about having made old Noel look small. They rounded the screen and, as they came forward, Melisande rose slim and exquisite from her chair and Bella cried :

" Well, Martin, we have a fine surprise for you ! "

I felt quite sick as I watched that meeting, saw the wretched young man halt, stiffen, grow white, and show in every line of his lean, vigorous young body how horrible the surprise was to him. And there Melisande made her first mistake—to my thinking—though I believe Bella found her impulse charming. She darted forward, flung her arms round Martin's neck, and hid her face in his neck.

" Oh, Martin darling, I've dropped such a brick ! You never got my letter, did you ? "

" Letter ? What letter ? " he cried furiously, disengaging himself from her arms and holding her hands as he stood back from her.

Trix stood there motionless for a long moment. She was in her riding-kit, and her golden curls under her cap were slightly roughened with the breeze. She wore no make-up, and as she came in her cheeks had been in a lovely glow. Now all colour was drained from them.

Bella effected an introduction. " Come and let me make you known to Martin's fiancée," she cried playfully. " Oh, Martin, how is it you never told us what a lucky man you are ! Miss Lebreton, my niece, Beatrix Owen."

Of course it took Trix but a very few seconds to pull herself together. She came up frankly, if not cordially, and shook hands. The contrast of the two girls was very marked. Martin gazed at them in sick, helpless fury.

At the moment in burst Ted and Ian. Ted stopped short and stared with an awful glare upon the intruder.

" The devil ! " he ejaculated, and Melisande, with

the prettiest laugh, cried out, " Meaning me, Teddie? How are you? Haven't seen you for ages. How long is it since we met—eh? "

" Blest if I know," said Ted stiffly. " I assure you I haven't been counting the days. And what, if I may ask, brought you here? "

" Why, Teddie, you may ask, but I shouldn't have thought you need do that. What should bring me here but the desire to see my Martin? "

" You might have let us know your kind intention. Given us time to put up the triumphal arch," said Ted, so rudely that I saw Bella glance in a puzzled way at him.

Martin found his voice. " How did you get here? "

" In the Apollo, of course," she replied.

" Shall I see you into it? I don't expect you've much time to spare."

Bella intervened at once. " My dear Martin, you evidently haven't much idea of my hospitality. What are you thinking of? " At this point the gong rolled through the hall. " As Miss Lebreton is here, of course I have insisted upon her staying for lunch. In fact, I think she should stay the night, as the afternoons are so short and it looks like rain to me. She has forty miles still to go."

Her blue eyes beaming with gratitude, Melisande admitted that she had found the journey longer than she expected and that her arms were very tired.

" Take her upstairs, Trix, she would like to powder her nose, I feel sure," said Bella playfully, but I interposed.

" I'll take her; I'm ready for lunch, Trix isn't," I said bluntly, and marched the young lady up the stairs with a feeling of hatred in my heart which I had not experienced since Sidney died. If I could, by touching her with my finger, have murdered her there and then, I do believe I should have done it; and we

were pursued by a glare from Martin's furious eyes that really seemed to me as if it might have a physically scorching power.

He turned, the moment we were out of range, and made a step towards where Trix had been standing a moment previously. She was not there. She had vanished, under the gallery towards the secondary stairs at the back of the hall. He stood as an officer just cashiered might stand when first the implications of what had happened filtered through to his intelligence.

"Well, Martin," said Bella, wholly ignoring the effect upon him of the unexpected meeting, "I do congratulate you! She is lovely, my dear boy. But I think you might have told us."

He struggled with the swelling in his throat and said huskily, "Ted knew."

"Then Ted should have told us! I can't forgive him! But we must try to make amends. Now that Miss Lebreton is here, of course she must stay."

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST EXPERIMENT

IT will be a long time before I forget that lunch !

Before eating I took Melisande upstairs to one of my beautiful new bathrooms. It evidently impressed her, though she had enough self-control to make no comment. I left her there to tittivate, and then fetched her and conducted her down to the hall, where Dixon had placed cocktails and sherry. She chose a cocktail, and after that a second, remarking with a winning smile that she needed a bracer after the miles she had driven. Just then Melian entered the hall attended by her Rudolf. They had not joined the riding-party (I don't fancy Rudolf has ever been on a horse in his life), but had spent the morning together, occupied, it was understood, by the consideration of the programme for the forthcoming entertainment.

The new arrival surprised them—evidently most agreeably as far as Rudolf was concerned. Introductions had hardly been made when we were shepherded in to lunch. A long side-table stands along the wall of our spacious Victorian dining-room. Ted and I had only made one alteration here—the replacing of the old yards-wide mahogany by a refectory table across which conversation was possible. We seated ourselves haphazard, as always at lunch. On the side-table were spread out the viands offered for our choice, mostly cold, but there were also chafing dishes holding piping-hot food.

None of the staff was in attendance; the young men waited on the ladies, if desired, but most of us went to the buffet and foraged for ourselves.

Melisande was very wary. Evidently our informal meal was a complete novelty to her and slightly confusing, but she watched carefully to see what others did. Her main difficulty, I soon perceived, was with regard to liquid refreshment. We women all took soft drinks, and most of the young men drank beer. She, however, was unable to resist the light wine offered. Evidently she could not envisage what she would have called a "high-class" meal without alcohol; and the amount she drank suggested a weak spot. Martin, stiff and cool, asked with a stony indifference what she would eat and, when she hesitated, invited her to indicate her tastes at the sideboard; which she did, biting her lip.

Ted played host with obvious reluctance. "Hope you don't mind being buttled by amateurs," he said as he poured her third glass of Chablis. "My aunt, who runs our show, belongs to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Domestic Servants. She believes it makes a real difference to the comfort of the staff if we dispense with their attentions at lunch; it also enables us to be as free and easy as we like."

Melisande's eyes kindled as she replied that she did like this free-and-easy. Studying her parted lips and gleaming eyes, I had the malignant idea that if this young lady were given rope enough she would speedily hang herself. Her keen glances darted from her morose fiancé to the other men present, returning continually to Ilianeff, who seemed to draw her gaze magnetically. One had to admit that she was very attractive, especially to men. Evidently Melian's boy-friend was having his allegiance shaken for the second time. He had perhaps found Trix unresponsive, and now here in this delightful house there had suddenly appeared another beauty, doubtless rich, since she had arrived in her own car: and this new addition, if one might judge by her manner and expression, was by no

means prepared to ignore all other eyes than those of the man she was to marry. Rudolf planted himself down facing her across the narrow table and began to talk to her, to the immense relief of the rest of us. Martin was like a skeleton at the feast, Ian was silent and Ted gloomy. The only gay one of the party was Trix, who rattled away to Ian, seated next her, about anything she could think of. She was rather making fun of Noel Gardner's golf and, it struck me, talking a bit wildly. Melisande was absorbing it all, evidently taking her cue from all that was said and storing it for future use.

Martin's miserable eyes hardly left Trix's face; luckily he was seated next to his betrothed, so she could not see the direction of his gaze. Beyond addressing him as " Darling ", she committed no kind of solecism and, to my unfeigned relief, she did not, as every moment I feared she might, rally him on his low spirits. Pretty soon Melian began to speak of the forthcoming entertainment.

Bella had taken a great fancy to the fair stranger. She had placed her next herself at table, and in the kindness of her heart she began to enlarge upon the wonderful powers of Professor Ilianeff.

Nobody dare stop her. Rudolf's eyes kindled with pleasure as he modestly depreciated his powers. " You must understand, Miss Lebreton, that I am in no sense a conjuror. Nothing of the Maskelyne and Devant about me. My powers are those of the Mystic. Are you interested in the Occult? "

" Oh very, *very* interested, but quite ignorant," said Melisande artlessly. " Will you be able to teach me a little? "

He smiled right into the big innocent blue eyes. " That depends upon two things—how susceptible you are to spiritual influences, and how much time you can give me——"

She dropped her gaze as she replied gracefully: "Unfortunately I can't answer either of those questions."

"I think I can answer the first myself," he swiftly retorted. "I feel certain you are a sensitive. I believe I could use you for various experiments already, without any teaching."

"Oh-h-h! Martin, did you hear that?" breathed Melisande, her breast heaving with excitement.

Martin replied without lifting his gaze from his plate: "If you appeal to me, I shouldn't say that being quick in the uptake was among your many charms," he replied, the sneer in his voice quite obvious.

"May I suggest that the exercise of such powers is rather like radio?" murmured Rudolf. "I mean it depends greatly upon the harmony between the transmitter and the receiver of the message."

Bella laughed her fat, comfortable laugh. "No doubt, no doubt! We are not crediting *you* with occult powers, Martin! But if, as the Professor seems to suppose, Miss Lebreton would be of use to him in his experiments, we must persuade her to stay—that is, if she would be willing to put herself under his tuition."

"Oh, Mrs. Owen, of course, *of course* I would do anything to help! As Martin so rightly says, I am not clever, but I do think I am sympathetic." At which speech Martin sent her a look of such concentrated malignity that it made me feel quite uncomfortable. With charitable intent to change the current of the conversation, I asked Rudolf where he became initiate—was it in India or Tibet?

He shrugged his shoulders as he replied: "In both, to tell the truth. I spent three years in a *gompa* at Podang, not far from Gangtok—not far therefore from the frontier. My *gomchen*, or religious instructor, was,

I believe, of mixed ancestry. His name was Khana, and he taught me the dread secret of the *kyilkhor*, which is a mystic diagram——" The speaker paused and cast around him a wary look, to see if there were the slightest reaction in the face of any of his hearers. There was none. We were all listening, as to an oracle, with the eager faces of disciples. Consequently he made the mistake of assuming that there was no one present who could by any possibility have been in Tibet—least of all the poor relation, the lady-housekeeper. Many English people nowadays have been in India, and he would not be surprised to find at the Baxted entertainment one or more who knew something of Indian magic. Wherefore Tibet was the safer choice.

"A mystic diagram," murmured Ted, playing into my hands; "to me that sounds particularly attractive: the kind of thing the exorcists of Europe used to draw to shield them from the powers of evil—a pentacle or something, was it not?"

"A Tibetan *gomchen* would think that kind of thing rather childish," Rudolf informed us with a superior smile, "though some of their lower-grade magicians do wear a five-sided crown when they are working spells. The *kyilkhor* is much more complicated. Every initiate, when he has reached a certain point in what one may call *expertise*, has his own particular *kyilkhor* made for him, and will use no other."

"And what," asked Ian, "constitutes *expertise*?"

"Oh—just for a few examples—the faculty of showing oneself in a place where the body is not; the faculty of summoning a *Dakini* to one's aid——"

"And what," breathed Melisande, who was listening like one spellbound, "is a *Dakini*?"

"A kind of goddess, or feminine deity from another world. The *Dakinis* impart special esoteric knowledge to their votary."

"And may one ask by what steps in training one acquires these powers?" demanded Ian.

"I should be delighted to expound, but I think the present company might find me dull. European minds are so unaccustomed to the beliefs and methods of the East that it is difficult to put before them such foreign ideas in words of one syllable."

Ted laughed. "Suppose you try us with a few—just a few words of even two syllables?" he suggested. "As perhaps you are aware, Orientalism is a branch of study not unknown even in British Universities."

"Monosyllables cover the names of all the stages of initiation," replied Rudolf swiftly. "But I think they will be gibberish to some of you, at least! The first is indicated by two words—*Ton* and *Lob*. The second is called *Gom*; and the last is *Togs*. All of you familiar with these?"

There was a murmured confession of ignorance, and I reflected that the young professor had at least some superficial knowledge of what he was talking about. It was a fine touch to use the more recondite formula of the training! Did he know that there were two? . . .

"Expound, expound!" cried Ted. "One ends up with Togs apparently, but I thought your true devotee usually ended up without any!"

"Ted, don't make fun!" said Melian angrily. She had her eye on me all the time, hoping I was impressed. Yet I felt fairly certain that she had been loyal to me and given Ilianeff no hint of the existence of the Great Lama whose portrait hung in my room.

"These stages," went on Ilianeff, "are not to be entered upon until one is accustomed to meditation—methodic meditations upon the symbolic *kyilkhor*. Sometimes, after a period of trial, the *gomchen* or teacher decides that the pupil will not repay any attempt to advance to the deeper mysteries; but if

progress is permitted, we use the more popular analysis, and the three stages would be stated as follows: Firstly *Tawa*. This means to look or examine. Secondly *Gompa*—to think, meditate. Third—*Chyöd pa*—to practise, realize. This is the fruit of accomplishment through the two former stages."

I sighed from my heart. Well do I remember the first time that Sidney pointed out to me how near the profound meditations of the Buddhist sages had brought them to the doctrine of the Trinity. . . . Not until psychology became a science was the sequence even partially understood by Western thought! . . . First, static power—the power of conscious being. Then knowledge—expression—the Word. Last the union of the two in action, which is dynamic. . . . I caught up my thoughts and drove them back from anything so unfitting a lunch-table as were my cogitations at the moment.

. . . East is East and West is West . . . .

Yes, truly! . . . and when those twain shall meet, each to pour into the other the content of their diverse minds . . . then maybe we shall all draw nearer to the deep things of God. . . .

When I again became aware of the chatter around me, Rudolf was leaning forward slightly, smiling into Melisande's eyes.

"I could do it now—without any training—compel you to do my bidding," he said in a low tone. "Shall I try?—Ah! you shake your head! You know I have power over you, and you fear to test it. Is that not so?"

He was holding the girl's eyes with his own. Their gaze was interlocked.

"You can't!" she breathed, panting a little. "Martin, tell him not to!"

Martin's laugh was the epitome of contemptuous scorn.

"Don't be afraid, there's nothing in it," he said.

Rudolf sent him an inimical glance. Drawing out his pocket-book he scribbled a few words in it, tore out the page and handed it folded to Melian.

"We will see. Don't look at that, please, nor show it to anyone until the experiment is over," said he quietly. With that he leaned back in his chair and laid his watch on the table. He lifted his eyes to Melisande. "You agree? . . . Then give me three minutes, please."

Everyone fell silent. Melisande, feeling herself the centre of attraction, was at first rather silly, fidgeting and giggling. Rudolf neither moved nor spoke, but his eyes upon her had, after about half a minute, the effect of quietening her.

Her lovely features composed themselves into lines of such beauty that I marvelled. Her gaze became fixed and veiled, as if she did not see her surroundings. Her breathing grew lighter—hardly perceptible. She sat motionless.

Then suddenly she pushed back her chair and rose. Bella looked slightly scared. Melisande stood for some seconds beside her chair like one who has momentarily forgotten her instructions. Then she turned to her left and walked to the end of the room by the window, where stood a writing-table which nobody ever used. Upon it lay a pair of Trix's gloves which she had flung down there in her usual careless fashion. Melisande picked them up, though as it seemed with reluctance. She walked back to the table holding them at arm's length, went straight up to Trix and offered them to her. Trix, after a momentary hesitation, took them from her and laid them beside her. Melisande thereupon walked back to her place

at table, and sat down. Rudolf neither spoke nor moved, except that he turned his eyes away from her face. When he did this, she started, sat up and looked around as though awaking from a nap.

"Oh," said she in a disappointed tone, "then I couldn't do it after all."

"Oh, pardon me, you have done just what I willed you to do," said Rudolf lightly. "Melian, read out what I wrote on that bit of paper, if you please."

Melian read obediently, "Go to the window, pick up the gloves lying on the table and hand them to their owner."

"I may point out," said Rudolf with a satisfied smile, "that I did not know who was the owner."

Melisande was looking round the table, her colour ebbing and flowing. "Have I really got up and moved about the room? I don't remember moving at all," she said in an embarrassed tone.

There was a brief silence, which Ian tactfully broke by clapping his hands. Everyone then laughed and applauded.

Bella leaned forward, her eyes alight with interest, and said earnestly, "Do you mean seriously to tell me, Professor Ilianeff, that you and Miss Lebreton are strangers to each other—I mean that this is your first meeting?"

"Certainly," replied Rudolf emphatically, while Melisande made confirmatory murmurs.

"Well, then, I think there can be no question of the success of your entertainment next week!" cried my sister delightedly: and the internal groaning of everyone present save Rudolf and the fair Melisande was almost audible.

As we left the room Ted murmured to me: "If Ilianeff were not quite such a—such an outsider—couldn't we work the thing through him? Get him

to order her to sign a paper—better still to write a letter, breaking it off——?"

"Oh, Ted, I'm afraid it's too late! The harm's done. Have you noticed Trix's face?"

Ted's countenance fell.

CHAPTER VI

MY EAVESDROPPING

"PLEASE, Mrs. Owen," begged Melisande sweetly as we left the table, "may I use your telephone? You see, I was on my way to visit friends who are expecting me and, before accepting your kind invitation definitely, I must speak to them and tell them I want to postpone my arrival until . . ."

She made a delicate pause, while Melian and Rudolf eagerly supplied dates and Bella confirmed them cordially. Melian then led Melisande along to the lobby wherein the telephone was installed.

Without any hesitation I hastened upstairs to my own sitting-room, where was fixed up an extension to this telephone specially installed for me so that I could talk to Dixon without troubling her to come upstairs. Deliberately I sat down and moved the pointer to the position required. I was going to overhear what Melisande said. I was convinced that she had no visit in view, that the whole arrangement was a clever plant, and I wanted to know if I was right.

I offer no apology for my conduct, for I held it to be justifiable. No one but myself would ever know of it. I did not intend to mention my eavesdropping to anyone, but it seemed to me necessary that I should be in the position of knowing every angle of the situation with which we had to deal. So, without a qualm, I listened in, while the charming voice—eloquent to me of elocution lessons—called a number on the Baxted Exchange; a fact which, as may be guessed, went to stiffen my determination.

There was some delay before she got her connection.

When she did, it was a masculine speaker on the wire.

Melisande's voice came low and urgent : " That you, Algie ? "

" Oh, good Lord—is it Mel ? "

" Speaking—from where do you suppose ? "

" Not Savileas ? "

" Savileas it is. Most successful gate-crashing ! "

" I hand it to you, Mel ! You are the goods ! "

" I am invited to stay here till Wednesday week. I told them my friends were expecting me and that I must ring up and ask if next week would suit them as well ! So now the question is—how I am to introduce you here ? We must meet quite casually, out in the road somewhere, and I shall be awfully surprised to see you, of course ! "

" Of course. Though no more so than I to see you !——"

" Well "—her voice sounded doubtful—" I can introduce you, but you must do the rest for yourself. I warn you they're a bit prunes-prism here : you'll have to go ve-e-ry carefully. Not your sort, and they're not mine either. The girl Martin's sweet on is lovely—in fact they're a handsome family, but the women seem to be almost on the water-wagon and altogether, I hardly know how to describe it, but they're not a bit matey—in fact they give me the willies—I feel I'm treading on eggs all the time."

A chuckle came over the wire. " And how did your high-and-mighty Martin react to your appearance ? "

" React ! You said it, my dear. He couldn't conceal his fury. It positively blazed out of him. I wondered the old girl didn't notice how unpopular I was, but she's quite dense. The other aunt, the woman with the foreign name, is twice as 'cute ; I couldn't get past her at all ! I should have been dining under a hedge if it had rested with her ! But as it is I think

all's well. I'm Mrs. Owen's white-headed boy all right, and that's what counts ! "

The man murmured what sounded like a compliment, only in a slang that conveyed nothing to me. She cut him short :

" None of that, Algie. This is tricky going, and I don't want to fall down on the post. Let me see, what did we settle ? Your father, Colonel Finnegan, died insolvent and you have been pluckily fighting the world and standing manfully on your own feet—that's the agreed tale, isn't it ? "

" Yes, and it's most of it true too——"

" Just as well—as little lying as possible—and we're only slightly acquainted—mind that ! No familiarities——"

" Darn it, Mel, I think of the two of us I know what's what better than you do——"

This implied slur apparently got inside her skin. She laughed wickedly.

" All right, my lad ! We'll see ! But it's not an easy rôle you're cast for ! You have got to go the limit but never overstep it ! The thing must be broken off, but also it must be Martin who does the breaking ! He's in such fury at the moment that I have a sneaking hope that I've done the trick simply by arriving here ! But I can never be sure with these classy ones, their minds don't work the same as mine does. Oh, Algie, I do wish I'd tried this plan with the other one—Ted Owen. He's far richer than the Rhodes family ! But we must do the best we can. . . ."

Algie made a sound expressive of derision. " Think Ted Owen would have fallen for the sob-stuff ? You've got another guess coming, my girl ! "

His fellow-conspirator was most evidently annoyed. Her voice rasped as she replied :

" You'll understand, please, that there's to be no

monkeying about. You've got to be quite the little gentleman——"

His voice in reply held a new note—fiercely possessive:

"What d'you mean, monkeying about? It's you that want reminding of that. The fact that Rhodes is such a milk-and-water lover has been the only thing that made me consent to this. But you try playing around with a man you're inclined to like and watch me react——"

"Hold your tongue!" Her tone was suddenly ice. "Please tell me for whom this whole thing has been staged if not for you? If you're not careful, it'll be a case of watching *me* react, and see how you'll like that!"

He began to splutter and plead, but she cut him very short, and after a few expostulations he subsided. She pointed out that she had done her stuff successfully and now it was up to him to do his. She could not say when she should be out riding or where. He must wait his opportunity. She flatly declined to risk slipping out to meet him. She had dug herself in, and she meant to stay dug in. In short, she was taking no chances.

With that she rang off. Not a word did she say of Rudolf or of the forthcoming hypnotic experiments. Closing the door, she emerged with a saintly little face into the hall and said laughingly that her friends were a little peeved at her defection and she had had to be very diplomatic. She glanced round the hall, and when I came downstairs, which I did almost immediately, she was standing there, evidently looking for Martin. But neither he nor Trix was to be seen.

I spoke to Melisande, inviting her to come up to her room and unpack. Her luggage had been already taken off her car and brought in. Her face lit up.

"Oh, thank you; you are all so kind! I should

love to come upstairs, but don't you think I ought first to find Martin and put myself right with him? I—I thought when he first saw me he looked rather taken aback, and I felt a bit guilty about it—pushing in upon his friends—only Mrs. Owen was so charmingly cordial and it seems I can really be of use to her if I stay—but I know this is Martin's first visit to Savileas, and I don't know what I should do if I thought I was embarrassing him——"

At the moment the door of the library was flung open and Martin, looking white and strained, marched into the hall.

"Ah," said I, "Miss Lebreton is looking for you, Mr. Rhodes. If you want to have a talk you will find the morning-room empty."

Poor Martin! The man looked literally *hunted*. He paused as an escaping criminal suddenly confronted by the police might be presumed to pause, then swerved to the door of the morning-room and flung it open, making a gesture for Melisande to pass in, which she did. I had no means of eavesdropping on the ensuing conversation, and just as I was debating what I should do, the door of the library once more opened and Trix with a set mouth came forward, saw me and sprang to me as if I were a refuge.

"Oh, Onnie, I'm chilled to the bone! Let me come up to your Shrine and get warm, may I?"

Ted and she had always called my room the Shrine, and came here as children whenever they needed comforting. We went upstairs together, and she exclaimed with pleasure at the glow of my hearth, cowering down upon the fender-stool as though physically chilled, and leaning her head on my knee.

I put my hands upon her hair, and she muttered: "Oh, Onnie, the comfort that you are!"

For some moments neither of us spoke. I let her "hush and bless herself with silence"; for I knew

much of what she must be experiencing. She had been quite sure of Martin; no idea of a rival had presented itself. Therefore she had not tried to analyse her own state of mind, but was drifting along on a current of warm sweetness. Melisande's intrusion had enlightened her with a shock like a slap in the face. She was more than astonished—she was outraged—by the discovery of the force of her own feeling! She was likewise extremely angry, one might say furious. After a time she said suddenly:

"He ought to have told me—or ought I not to care whether he told me or not? . . . Has the whole thing been a delusion of my own?"

"What—that Martin loved you? Oh no, indeed. I have no doubt that he loves you, poor chap——"

She moved abruptly, sat upright. "Well, but then how . . . Nonsense! He never can have loved me, not as I understand love!"

"Whatever you may understand, or think you understand, you don't understand Martin a bit."

She snorted impetuously.

"He loved you the moment he saw you; loved you, as children say, 'for keeps'. You turned from him to your Professor of Biology, and for three months I was horribly afraid you meant to marry him. Martin was hard hit. He went off to Darnley, and there, in a lone pub with nothing to do and utterly wretched, he was caught by a contemptible trick—I'll tell you all about it some day——"

She grasped my knees. "Now, Onnie—tell me now."

"Well—why not?" I mused aloud, and I thereupon told her the story of Martin's undoing as Ted had told it me.

"I don't think," I concluded, "that she makes much secret of the fact that she wants him to break it off. Naturally he is bitterly ashamed of her and of

the whole sordid situation. He hoped and prayed that by systematic neglect he might make her tired of it—bring her to the point of breaking it off herself. Colonel Rhodes would be so stricken if it all came out in court. Ted thinks she has letters that Martin would give much not to have made public."

Trix began to say that any way the thing showed that Martin was not what she had thought him. If he really had been in love with her, he had soon turned his eyes elsewhere. She seemed in no way placated. I had perhaps told her Martin's story too soon. Her anger should first have been allowed to cool—that compound of hurt feeling, wounded pride, sense of insult—one could not imagine its subsiding at a word.

"Tell me," she demanded passionately, "you don't think Martin's a fool, do you? But I ask you—could anyone look at that girl and not see that she was that type?"

"I agree that most women would see through her—yes; but a man's different. That is, Martin's type of man, with no experience of that kind of woman. Such a man usually sees, at first, only what the woman shows him—if she is beautiful; and even you will agree that our Melisande is done up in a most attractive package."

"Why didn't he tell me?" fumed Trix.

"He told Ted."

"And Ted told you! Yet nobody could give me a hint! I think you've all been very mean."

"I hoped you never need know. That she would or could force herself in here never occurred to me. Ted and Martin both believed they could cut the knot without having to hurt you. But he is hopelessly handicapped by his conviction that if he breaks it off she will make public scandal. Look at her, Trix! Think of that lovely creature weeping before a jury of good men and true! Martin wouldn't have a chance."

"He'd better try being so brutal that she'll *have* to break it off."

"Nothing would make her do that—I mean nothing in the way of brutal treatment . . ."

"Well? What do you suggest? You sound as if you had a scheme . . .?"

"We should need a private detective to carry out my idea. I feel a little inquiry into our Melisande's past might have results. If, for instance, she is already married . . ."

"You think that possible?"

"Quite. But not easy to prove. I am sure her real name is not and never was Melisande Lebreton, which would mean that any marriage she may have contracted would have been in a different name, and it would not be easy to trace it."

"Not knowing the man," put in Trix.

"It might be possible," I said, "because I believe I have an idea of the name of the bridegroom."

"You have, Onnie?"

"Yes, but it's only speculative . . . and as to where or when it happened, I have no clue . . . it would need a special inquiry——"

"Hateful!" snapped Trix, and said no more for some time, brooding in the silence of the flickering flames that lit up her miserable face. "Well," said she at last, rising to her feet and throwing back her shoulders defiantly, "that's over! It's been rather wonderful while it lasted, but somehow I never believed it could be true."

There was nothing to be said. Evidently I had not been able to help her at all. Nothing, in fact, could help her at that stage but the state of her own heart, and of that I could not be certain. I mean, the extent of her devotion to Martin. Sympathy was of no use. She needed bracing.

"All right," I returned, quite sharply, "so long as

you pull yourself together. Only don't run round the meadow grieving like the young lady of Woodstock Town !—The ' swashing and the martial outside ' is a great help on these occasions."

She pushed back her hair, staring at me. " Good lack, Onnie, I've been drivelling !—Don't tell anybody ! Men have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love—"

She took a stroll round the room—had a look at Sidney's portrait, lit fitfully by the leaping flames. Returning she resumed her seat with resolution, drew out a paper which had been tucked into her belt and displayed it.

" Look ! Rudolf and Martin drew this up and showed it to me at lunch. Let us give it our earnest attention."

Purposefully she began to go through the carefully drawn up suggestion for a Programme. Ilianeff most wisely advised that we should not rely solely upon his mystic experiments for the success of the evening. He prescribed a few songs and a one-act play.

Before we had been talking long, Ted's tap sounded on the door and he came in. Seeing Trix, he checked himself in a moment's uncertainty. She allowed him no time to blunder.

" Just the man we want," said she briskly. " Come and cast your eye over this ! Ilianeff is a born showman, even if he isn't quite the mahatma he would like us to suppose. Let us get to grips with this, Ted—you and Onnie and I. I don't want the control to leave our hands. As you know, Noel is coming down to dinner to-night, and I would like to have the whole thing ready to lay before him. We have only a very short time for rehearsals."

CHAPTER VII

THE WARRENS: AND ALGIE

I PASSED a restless night. Not that my conscience troubled me. I felt no remorse on the score of my eavesdropping, which had been very valuable to me and of which I said nothing to anybody. But I was going through a certain mood of mental discomfort such as I have two or three times before experienced in my life and which has hitherto foreboded some kind of calamity. I was too tired to collect myself and pass the night in meditation, which is my habitual remedy for mental restlessness. The Martha side of my life was in full occupation of my outer mind, I dared not let myself go and summon the Mary of contemplation to my aid. As often happens after a misspent sleep-time, my obstinately wakeful eyelids succumbed to overwhelming fatigue just when I should have been feeling bright and ready to rise. I drifted off into heavy slumber, from which the first breakfast bell awoke me with a guilty start, and there ensued such unseemly haste as I pride myself upon never exhibiting, while I bathed and dressed against time.

I was just fastening my belt when I heard the loud hoot of a motor-horn in the drive and wondered who were our early visitors.

I could see a car sweeping along, but the front door where it came to rest was invisible from my window. Voices, however, floated up to me : a raucous shouting and a shrill, high, feminine scream which could belong only to Gracie Warren.

I sighed impatiently. The Warrens are a standing dish. They are a childless couple who live on moderate

means in a little house about a mile out of Baxted. They have no occupation but to cultivate their neighbours. They are both, I should judge, nearing sixty years of age, but full of bounce and vigour, and most anxious that nobody should ever think of them as too old to be what they consider "sporting".

That they should arrive to breakfast was by no means an unprecedented event, though not usual at this time of year; and I knew Dixon would bring in fresh cups the moment she heard that wild hooting. Meanwhile my presence seemed urgently desirable, and I forthwith opened my door and hastened down into the hall. There I found Ted, the only representative of the family, being warmly embraced by Gracie Warren, who adored him. This "pash" Ted suffered more or less gladly, for Gracie was not really a bad sort. She was now assuring him that she was hungry for a sight of him, that he was evidently in the pink and that the moment she heard from Noel Gardner that we were what she called "on the war-path" at Savileas, she ordered Bennie to get out the car and to proceed to offer any kind of help and service that we required.

"I knew you'd give us a cup of coffee," she cried, "and this is really the only time to catch you, I do so dislike chasing after you for miles only to be told that you are all out."

As she babbled on I became aware that not only she and her Bennie were present, but a tall and extremely decorative young man in a heavy motoring coat who was looking at Ted as if a bit doubtful of his welcome.

"Oh!" screamed Gracie, "here comes Onnie! Well, my dear, you see before you the bad pennies—always turning up—no escape—and do let me introduce a new friend——"

She turned to the stranger, clutched him by the arm and drew him towards me.

"You know, my dears, I'm learning to fly! Don't

faint! Yes, I am! Quite a fresh idea—eh? And there, standing before you, is my reason! You remember they had such a dreadful old instructor at Baxted—his breath always smelt of aniseed, and Bennie kept on nagging at me to take lessons, and I said no fear, as long as that old Bath bun ran the show. And then one day Bennie and I were over at the 'Drome seeing a friend off and this nice thing emerged and asked if we were wanting to go up! Allow me to present Mr. Finnegan! Oirish, isn't it? And I tell you he's a broth of a boy! So I've promised to take lessons, though I'm convinced I'll never have the confidence to pilot myself! And we met him on the road this morning, and I said, 'We're just going to plant ourselves for breakfast on the nicest people in the county, and if you're a good little boy we'll take you along and show you to them—or them to you, or both.'"

I fancy my smile was a bit grim. Certainly Finnegan had not let the grass grow under his elegantly shod feet!

Ted said over my shoulder in his coldest tones: "Hallo, Finnegan!"

"What! You know him!" cried Gracie in surprise.

"He used to be at the Darnley 'Drome when I was a learner," said Ted shortly: and I think there is no doubt that Gracie—who is no fool—perceived by his tone that she had been a little precipitate in this bit of gate-crashing.

Ted took her by the arm and led her away out of hearing. I followed. "Look here, Gracie, sorry to be so blunt, but I don't like your friend," said he quietly. "I don't want to introduce him to my womenfolk. We should have been delighted to give you and Bennie breakfast, but if this merchant is an indispensable accessory, I think you had really better buzz off this time."

Gracie's jolly face looked sadly cast down. "Mercy, Ted, you know him and don't like him," she murmured. "Why was I not warned? I thought him so charming——"

Bennie was not without perception, and he guessed that his impetuous wife had dropped a brick. "Well, well," he cried, "I'm glad to have seen you, Ted, but I notice none of the others are yet down, and we have an appointment at Baxted, so I think we'll be on the move."

He was just too late. A voice full of charm and of joyous welcome floated down the stairs: "Oh! Oh! Why, I believe that is Algie!"

Melisande appeared on the stairs, and close behind her was Bella herself, delighted to see the Warrens, who were prime favourites of hers.

Melisande drifted across the hall, took Finnegan's hand and cried, "Well——! This is like a breath of home! How did you get here, Algie?"

"Oh, Ted, I say! That's a cunning little piece! Your latest?" whispered Gracie. She searched his lowering face with anxiety. "What's wrong, laddie? I seem to have dropped a whole hod of the largest brickbats!"

"Honestly, Gracie, I'll explain later; but at the moment I would be everlastingly grateful to you if you would clear off your Irish protégé before my Aunt has time to invite him to breakfast."

Gracie beamed at him and even winked. She was convinced that she had grasped the situation completely. Obviously Ted was smitten with this lovely girl and the Irishman with the heavily fringed eyes was a rival. "I get you, Teddie bear," she murmured, and Ted gulped hurriedly. "I'll be round to tea this afternoon and explain further."

Then she took command of the situation and, before Bella could get going, had invented some excuse as

wild as it was plausible and swept both her companions away with her, assuring her hostess that she had merely come in to invite people to tea that afternoon and had no intention at all of cadging a breakfast.

I overheard Finnegan mutter to Melisande: "You said they were sticky—an under-statement, my child! The Glue-pot family, and no error!"

However, he saw that his own policy was to back up Gracie in her fictitious engagement for all he was worth. He had his reward. Melisande took him by the arm and led him up to Bella herself.

"Mrs. Owen, this is one of my oldest friends, I've known him all my life! May I present him to you? You'll ask him to come over one day while I'm here, won't you?"

Bella responded so graciously as to surprise her family. She is not usually at her sweetest before breakfast.

Finnegan went gaily away with his object obtained. Just as he was walking, Melisande beside him, towards the screen that masks the front door, Ian Blackwood came down the stairs. He made no attempt to conceal the look of astonishment and distaste with which his eye lighted upon the triumphant Algie. He said nothing at all, arched eyebrows and a nod were all he vouchsafed to the departing visitor. So, after all, it was as it were with his tail between his legs that Finnegan finally vanished from view.

It was the first time I had seen Melisande discomfited. Her colour burned most unbecomingly, because it did not match the top layer of her complexion. She was mute, but Bella said quite peevishly, "Very stupid of Gracie, dashing off like that! I don't understand it! She must have meant to stay to breakfast, otherwise why come at such an hour—and I wanted particularly to know how she is getting on with that newfangled stove they have been installing."

"I fancy," I said, "that she had not realized what a large party we already are, and they had that young man from the Aerodrome with them, quite a stranger to everyone. I think she was wise not to stay."

This was more than Melisande could brook. "Mr. Finnegan, who was with Mrs. Warren, was no stranger to me," said she. "He is a very old friend, and I was pleased to see him."

There was a momentary silence, and I think she dimly perceived that her audience, except for Mrs. Owen, was definitely unsympathetic. That lady, however, drew the girl's hand through her arm and toddled off to the morning-room, where breakfast was always served, assuring her that she had invited Mr. Finnegan to visit Savileas again.

However, Ted had not done. When we were all seated at table he said as he deposited before his aunt some ham which he had cut for her: "I wish, old dear, you would just send me a glance before you issue invitations to strangers. I know you're the Missis, but I like to have some say in the people who come here——"

"My dear Ted, but this young man was brought here by Gracie——"

"... who has just picked him up with her customary indiscretion! What does she know of him? She said she had only met him two or three times——"

"Really, Ted, you're being very rude," remonstrated Bella. "Mr. Finnegan is an old friend of Miss Lebreton, who is Martin's fiancée."

"Miss Lebreton is young and inexperienced," said Ted quietly, "and naturally prejudiced in favour of an old acquaintance. Ask Ian his opinion of Finnegan, if mine doesn't carry weight enough."

Aunt Bella looked a bit startled, turning her eyes on the Squadron-Leader, who looked up. "Oh, I've nothing against the young man; not my sort," he replied with a contemptuous indifference.

Those ever-ready pearly drops started to Melisande's eyes and she seemed about to launch some attack on Ted. I guessed that he had deliberately determined to provoke her, and expected to hear her give herself away, but at that moment Melian rushed downstairs, closely followed by Rudolf and also by Martin, all three with their mouths full of apologies.

"Come, Martin!" cried Trix gaily, breaking in so that we all gave her our attention. "It really was a pity you came down so late. We had the Warrens romping in—I don't believe you ever met them—but they wouldn't stay to breakfast——"

"Wouldn't stay!" said Ted with sarcasm. "I gave them the frozen mitt. Who do you think was with them? Finnegan, the Air Instructor!"

"Oh, good Lord!" said Martin, with a scornful laugh. "Let 'em all come—eh?"

"Why, Martin, do you also not like Mr. Finnegan? Such a handsome young man!" said poor Bella in some consternation.

"A nasty bit of work," said Martin indifferently. "I don't wonder that Ted didn't overflow with hospitality. Sorry I'm late, Mrs. Owen, I hadn't a very good night."

"Oh, poor chap!" said Trix lightly. "Never mind, you shall come with me for a good gallop; that'll blow away the cobwebs."

He raised his eyes to hers as if he would read her mind; and what he saw seemed to have a tonic effect on him. "That's a very good idea," he said with energy. "What time shall we start?"

"I hope," said Bella, "that you can mount Miss Lebreton?"

Martin said without lifting his eyes from his plate, "Miss Lebreton doesn't ride."

"Ha! That's fine news," said Rudolf with satis-

faction. "Then we'll have a thorough good go at the programme this morning, won't we?"

After that the conversation turned upon mysticism, or what the gay company understood by that maligned term.

They were talking of a certain Indian Yogi who had just given a demonstration, in London, of his being able to live immersed in water in a sort of coffin. Being pressed by Melian and Melisande, Rudolf admitted to having done much the same sort of thing himself.

"I'd rather you didn't try that here," said Ted cautiously. "It doesn't always come off, you know—you remember the 'Master of Ballantrae', don't you?"

In the animated discussion that followed, the sore subject of Finnegan's intrusion fell into the back-ground. I had never in my life felt so thankful for Bella's consistent hostility to my late husband. She would have died rather than mention my own capacities in this line, which, though they are limited, are nevertheless real enough. I think she wondered at my own reticence, perceiving with surprise that Ted and Trix were evidently aiding and abetting me; and that she was grateful to all three of us. Probably she thought we had decided to give Rudolf a clear field; which was, of course, partly the case. Anyway, she was thoroughly pleased by our conspiracy of silence, so much so that she was in a very good humour all the day. Also she was anxious to placate Ted, whom she saw she had annoyed by her invitation to Finnegan. I could see her pondering upon his attitude. How could Melisande's friend be unacceptable to Ted? Could it be that he was jealous? Naturally enough, no doubt of her own wisdom in inviting Melisande to stay so much as crossed her mind. She was Martin's fiancée, and therefore taken for granted. But if Ted

also was in love with the little beauty, things might be awkward.

If she had had more perception, she might have seen how all the house-party with the exception of Rudolf avoided Melisande, who followed Bella about, clinging to her, a pursuit for which she would certainly not have had leisure had others demanded her attention.

Sitting at her hostess's feet in the morning-room, holding her Berlin wool to be wound, she poured into her ear an account of poor Algie's noble fight with fate, how he had been brought up in luxury, how on his father's death he found he had inherited only debts, how he had put his shoulder to the wheel, begun by manipulating pumps at a filling-station, got his training in return for labour at an Aeroplane Factory, and was now hoping for a better appointment.

"I can't think what they have against him," she plaintively sighed. "Squadron-Leader Blackwood could do so much for him, but he doesn't seem to like him. Perhaps it is because he is Irish."

As I removed two or three vases for refilling and passed them out to Dixon, who was helping me, I heard fragments of this talk, and heard Bella promising to tackle the Squadron-Leader.

I was soon called away, however, because the subject now in the foreground was the one-act play with which it was intended to complete our Programme. Gracie Warren was known to us all as an excellent low comedian, and Ted said she had a play up her sleeve which would exactly suit—present day, interior scene, and only four characters—easy to rehearse, easy to put on. We soon fixed up that Martin and Trix should take the parts of the two young lovers, Gracie that of the elderly lady who was really the hit of the piece, and Ted the irascible old man whom she foiled in his vindictive schemes. Ted got on the 'phone to Gracie, told her to have the play ready for reading that after-

noon, and said he was bringing over the three other performers, with his friend Blackwood, whose hobby was the growing of carnations and who wanted to see Captain Warren's hot-houses.

He knew that the production of her play with herself in a congenial rôle would place her in the seventh heaven of delight, and completely efface all memory of the snub he had that morning felt himself forced to administer.

CHAPTER VIII TWO IN THE WINTER-GARDEN

To my sister's unfeigned delight, Melisande actually accompanied her hostess on a motor drive that afternoon; a thing that our guests mostly avoid adroitly. They went to Abminster, did some shopping, looked at the Cathedral and the castle—how terribly bored Melisande must have been !—and returned to tea, after which Rudolf marched off both Melian and Melisande for purposes of rehearsal.

Ian Blackwood returned about seven o'clock with a message to say that Martin and Trix and Ted were staying on at the Warrens for what Gracie called " a scratch supper ", the play being so exactly what they wanted that they wished to put it in hand at once. We were consequently only a small party at dinner, after which Melian, who played a good game of billiards, took on the Squadron-Leader and they departed to the billiard-room.

Bella and I went too for a time, as Bella is fond of a certain chair there, with a good light over it and a pleasant contiguity to the fire. I soon departed and took a much-needed rest in my own sitting-room, wondering to myself the while as to how this situation was going to develop. I could see that Martin was trying to force an issue by giving all his time and attention to Trix, and that she had decided to help on the good work. I did not think that even Melisande could stand against these tactics for long. Meantime I felt that Rudolf would bear watching. All dinner-time I studied him, and it was evident that he was absorbed in Miss Lebreton to a degree for which he

himself was unprepared and which he found somewhat bewildering. He had taken great trouble to bring her under his influence, and it appeared that the net result of it all was to bring him most fatally under hers.

Ilianeff had lived the life of the student, somewhat starved sexually. Melian's attraction was of an intellectual kind, and her money may have influenced him. The sudden irruption of Melisande was a shock; and her instant succumbing to his psychic influence was like a potent drug seizing upon his senses. To use a *cliché*, she drew him as the moon the tides. He was barely conscious all dinner-time of anyone or anything but her. What added to his emotional disturbance was the fact, of which I soon became aware, that the girl was being most powerfully affected by the psychic influence that he brought to bear upon her—something utterly outside her former experiences.

After we left the dining-room the two of them passed from my mind completely for a time because I had so much else to think about, having to write the invitations for Bella's big dinner-party and to think out the menu before submitting it to my invaluable Mrs. Draper in the kitchen next morning.

It must have been considerably after eleven when I rose and went downstairs to find out what the rest of the world was about. Martin and Trix and Ted had not yet returned from Blixlands, and Melisande should have been feeling, if not showing, pique. I peeped into the billiard-room and saw that the game was over and Melian and Blackwood were sitting by the fire with Bella, smoking and chatting. Where could the other couple be? I searched in vain through the ground-floor sitting-rooms.

Then an idea struck me. Savileas, as a truly Victorian house, includes a large winter-garden or conservatory among its nineteenth-century amenities.

This leads by glass doors out from the smaller or back drawing-room, and is not much used by the family, but it is always kept beautifully warm on account of the valuable tropical flora within. I remembered that Bella had taken Melisande in there to look round earlier in the evening, and felt convinced, even before peeping in and noting that the lights were on, that this was where those I sought were passing the evening. Thinking it was time to round them up, I went in, with no intention to enter secretly or to steal a march upon them; but it is not my habit to be noisy, and probably I made no sound.

My way was down an alley banked with fine gloxinias and overhung with lapageria, allamanda, datura, and all the exotic favourites of a bygone generation. I heard no voices, and had just come to the conclusion that the missing ones were not there, when I turned a corner, down a path at right angles which led out into the centre vista, closed by a fountain and grouped with easy chairs.

Then I saw them and stopped short; not for purposes of spying, but because it seemed impossible to advance upon them without warning.

They were seated on a low, cushioned seat, a kind of couch, big enough to hold three. The girl was in the man's arms, her head thrown back, he was stooping low over her and was kissing her throat repeatedly —long, soft, slow kisses.

She was lying quite lax in his hold, both her hands upon her lap, but as I watched, she made a movement, as if impelled by some force too strong for her, and flung up her arms about his neck.

I am no authority upon the modern code of manners, and know nothing about what I believe in the States they call "petting parties". But it seemed to me that this was a trifle impassioned for mere light dalliance.

On noiseless feet I turned to flee, deciding not to call them until I was out of sight. As I retraced my way down the alley I had already once passed, something attracted my attention. A movement, a change of light somewhere outside in the dark, beyond the glass walls. It looked as if the whitish oval of a face and the shape of a hand pressed to the pane had been suddenly removed.

I jumped a little, for who could be out in our grounds at that time on a winter's night?

I went instantly close to the glass and peered forth. I saw nothing but the blackest darkness. The heat within caused the moisture to trickle down, and made it impossible to see out, even if there had been anything to descry. I saw no movement, heard no sound, not even the slightest. I was not sure of not being mistaken. The urgent thing seemed that the attention of the two within should be at once attracted; so, pausing only an instant before hastening the rest of the way back to the door of entrance, I stopped there, raised my voice, and called aloud upon Miss Lebreton by name.

There was a silence. I held my breath, glancing uneasily at the black, glistening outer walls, but discerning nothing.

Then Rudolf answered my call and cried out, "Coming!"

After a brief hesitation I went back into the drawing-room and stood beside the dying fire awaiting them. They came presently, and I was slightly startled when Melisande first stepped out from the comparatively dim illumination of the conservatory into the fuller light of the alabaster bowls that hung from the drawing-room ceiling.

She had the look of a sleep-walker or one not fully alive to her surroundings. Rudolf seemed to be gently urging her forward, and I saw her put out a hand a

little backwards, groping for his. He did not give it, but stood back, leaving her to walk on towards me till she stopped as if she saw me suddenly and looked surprised.

"Why, Miss Lebreton, have you been asleep?"

She looked puzzled. "I—I—don't think so. Have I been asleep, Professor?"

Rudolf laughed as if rallying her. "Why," he said, "I hope not, but I expect I was very dull. Prosing on, and expecting you to listen! Perhaps you did take a little nap! You seemed surprised when Mrs. Zangula called."

"Yes. I was surprised when Mrs. Zangula called. But it was because I was so interested in what you were saying . . . what time is it?"

"Going on for twelve—time you went to bed," I said briskly, ringing the bell as I spoke.

It was answered by Grindlay, Bella's chauffeur, who always comes into the house about ten o'clock, as I like Dixon to go to bed early. It is the man's duty to remain up and close the house after everyone is in.

"Grindlay, will you please let Tartar loose and go with him round the grounds at once with a flash-lamp? Particularly round the winter-garden," I said. Then, turning to Ilianeff, "There was someone moving or prowling round outside just now, but the night's too dark to distinguish anything."

It was impossible not to be conscious of the great start that Melisande gave when I issued the order to take out the mastiff.

"Oh," said she faintly, "surely nobody could be here—surely we are safe from burglars at Savileas."

"Burglars are things we seldom think of," she was assured. "But someone was definitely on the prowl just now outside on the terrace, trying to peer through

the glass. You had the light on by the fountain, had you not?"

Ilianeff said they had, and Grindlay swiftly departed on his errand. Melisande was showing signs of distress. She asked pressingly if the dog was dangerous. As we were trying to reassure her, Bella, Melian, and Blackwood came downstairs together, and Melisande made for Bella as for a refuge, gasping out that Mrs. Zangula had seen, or thought she had seen, a burglar looking into the winter-garden.

I said firmly that I was sure I had seen a face outside the glass.

"Were you in the conservatory, Rudolf?" asked Melian.

"Miss Lebreton and I were both there. It is delightfully warm and comfortable."

"And you saw nothing?"

"We were a long way from the outer glass," he replied quite coolly: "we could not have seen anything."

"But," went on Melian persistently, "if someone was looking in, could they have seen you?"

"Er—yes, they might have seen that someone was there. We had the lights on."

"Have you put them out?" asked Bella.

Rudolf assured her that they had.

"I'll go and look round," said Blackwood, walking out through the glass doors.

Just as he disappeared we all heard the sudden sound of Tartar giving tongue. He was baying furiously.

Melisande started violently, her hand went to her heart, and she turned deadly pale.

"My dear, what is the matter?" cried Mrs. Owen.

"I—I can't bear the idea of—of hunting a man with dogs!" gasped the girl, as white as paper, and shaking.

A moment later we heard a shout—I recognized it as Ted's voice. He was calling the dog, who instantly ceased to bark.

"There!" I said consolingly, "Ted has called him off. But I was right, there must have been someone there to make him so noisy."

There was wine and whisky on a side table, and Ilianeff went and mixed a drink for the shuddering Melisande, who had sunk down upon a couch. As she sipped it and regained a little colour, the door was opened, and in came Martin Rhodes and Trix, full of apologies for being so late.

"But everybody seems to be still about," said Martin, who was evidently in high spirits.

The story of the face at the window and of Melisande's scare was poured into their ears, and I saw the instant look of intelligence which dawned upon Martin's expressive features.

"Why, Trix, that must have been the man that darted past us just inside the drive gates," he said. "He ran at once out of the radius of my lights, and the night's so pitch black that I couldn't see an inch beyond."

"Where was Ted?" asked Bella.

"His car was ahead of mine, but not very far ahead," replied young Rhodes.

"Curious," said Bella; "that is the very first time we have ever had a burglar scare here. I am sorry that Melisande was so frightened."

Melisande by this time had collected herself completely, assisted by a pick-me-up which I reckoned that Rudolf had made a good deal stronger than is our habit. She rose from her seat, saying quietly that she ought to apologize, but that she had never been able to stand the sound of a dog in pursuit of a man. Turning with an angelic smile to Bella: "It's the real reason why I don't hunt," she explained. "I regret

it because I know how fond Martin is of hunting, but I can't."

"Well," I said, "you may be quite easy. The man was not caught. If Martin passed him near the drive gates, Ted must have called off Tartar long before he reached him."

She smiled at me quite gratefully. "Why, of course! I am so relieved—— He—he isn't likely to come back again, is he?—the burglar, I mean."

There was a chorus of reassurance. The knowledge of Tartar's existence would no doubt be a final deterrent to any scheme of burglary.

"At least for to-night," said Martin in a singularly cool and detached manner. "I don't think you need lock your door, Melisande."

My look flashed from Rudolf to the girl, and I distinctly saw a look—a long, dangerous look—pass between them. Was Ilianeff going to cut the knot of our problem for us?

Bella advised that Martin should escort his fiancée upstairs, and Trix and Melian also volunteered to see her to her room and make sure that she was all right.

"You're not nervous, my dear, are you?" asked Mrs. Owen anxiously.

Melisande gave her a sweet look, of the timid-fawn variety, and said that she was not.

"I'll switch the bell in her room on to Teresa, shall I, Aunt Bella?" suggested Trix.

Teresa is Bella's confidential maid, who travels with her, and has been in her post for many years. Permission was at once given, and Melisande was duly grateful.

"If anything alarms you or you can't sleep, Teresa will be with you in a few seconds," she was assured.

Smiling her thanks in the same grateful, artless fashion, Miss Lebreton slipped her crimson-tipped

fingers into Martin's arm, and we all went upstairs in twos and threes, Trix playing hostess quite kindly to the gate-crasher.

Ted slipped in to see me for a minute after everyone had dispersed. "Well, Onnie," he remarked, "it appears that our friend Finnegan isn't going to take it lying down."

"You think it was he?"

"Almost sure. I've always suspected that she was dead scared of him. She certainly had the wind up to-night, hadn't she?"

"Well she might have, my dear," I replied dryly. "If, as I suppose, Finnegan is her husband, and they are running this breach-of-promise stunt to obtain funds to enable them to live together, he must have been a good deal upset if he saw what was going on in the conservatory."

"Oh ho! Like that, was it? Ilianeff?"

"Making violent love. I saw him. Of course I don't know how much licence the young of to-day allow themselves, but it looked to me much more than a casual flirtation. I should say that Martin has not long to wait for some kind of solution to his difficulty. Ilianeff is no doubt an adept of some power. Looks as if he has the girl completely dominated."

"Oh, come, Onnie! I think you underrate our Melisande! She is as wily as twenty adepts. I would give her best, every time. She's as hard as nails. Fear is the only way to master her, and that's Finnegan's weapon."

"You think so? Well, time will show."

CHAPTER IX CONSCIOUS AND SUB-CONSCIOUS

WEARY though I was when sinking thankfully into bed that night, sleep would not come to me. Though I resorted to various formulæ which had hitherto proved efficacious for composing my mind, it remained obstinately active; and Ilianeff was the cause of this unrest.

He was beginning to show himself as a more formidable exponent of the occult than had at first seemed likely. In fact, it seemed that the only thing he lacked to make him a real adept was that he had not himself in complete control. He had allowed himself to fall in love with Melisande. Any man who did that needed to watch his step; but for one who had progressed so far in the mystic cult, it seemed to me that he was inviting catastrophe.

The woman who had lured him from his asceticism was as ruthless as *La Belle Dame sans merci*. True, there was no doubt that he was influencing her strongly, which made her future behaviour more incalculable; but she was far the harder of the two and, without any self-denying cult, she was able easily to subordinate every one of her desires to her greatest desire of all—namely, worldly advantage.

I could not make any overt move in the matter; could not convey to the man any sort of warning, lest by some unlucky chance his attention should be directed towards myself. The knowledge of how things were moving caused me to realize afresh how wonderfully far-seeing had been Sidney's wish that I should not practise any of the arts of an adept. In my inmost being was the conviction that the path

Rudolf was following was full of danger; yet equally strong was my determination not to show any kind of awareness. More than once since his arrival at Savileas I had, on looking up, found his eyes fixed upon me. They were eyes that never spoke. They never revealed him or his thoughts. They were there to guard their owner's secrets—the eyes of a mystic. At first it had not seemed necessary for me to be strictly on guard with him; and it could but be hoped that nothing had betrayed to him any secret thought that I did not desire to have known. Any inkling, on his part, of having to deal with unsuspected knowledge must be carefully countered by my continuing to play the rôle of the poor relation, the busy housekeeper. Practice had made that easy!

Considerations like these did not make for slumber. Realizing that to woo sleep I must turn the current of my thoughts completely, I switched on my bedside light and took up a book placed there for such emergency—light, amusing, well written enough to carry the mind along.

I began to read. The silence of the house was profound. The old grandfather clock on the landing was sighing as it ticked, as though the passing of each second were a matter for bitter regret. I was beginning to relax, when something flitted as it were at the side of my eyes. There was a darkness, a shape, between me and the door; a shadow moved. Involuntarily I glanced up—an impulse immediately regretted—for Ilianeff stood there at my bed's foot. It was as though he had entered the room from the corridor and were passing through to the other exit, leading to my sitting-room.

The door had not opened to admit him. He looked solid enough, but I knew in a flash that this was his double, and that anyone entering his room at that

moment would find him asleep—heavily asleep in his bed.

This nocturnal rambling disturbed me, because it gave colour to the idea which had been keeping me awake—namely, that he suspected me of being something other than I pretended to be.

This was a visit of exploration. His sub-conscious self desired to know me better. I had got to be very careful, and in a moment my armour was on. My soul was ready to resist invasion.

Such an intrusion of the sub-conscious self was no new thing to me. Sidney and I had travelled in Tibet, and had seen many such. I was not sure, however, whether this was a purpose that Rudolf himself in his ordinary consciousness had deliberately willed; or whether it was involuntary—a sub-conscious escaping of his desire for information about me. The latter seemed the more likely. If he had knowingly and with intention separated his double to go in search of me, then he was indeed a *doukhob*—a wonder-worker—and a foe to be respected and resisted with all the psychic force I owned.

Evidently he was earnestly trying to find out whether or no I was aware of his presence. He met only blank lack of interest or comprehension. Yawning slightly, I looked through him with a careless glance and turned again to my book.

This seemed to puzzle him. After a pause of uncomfortable length, during which my moral force had to assert itself more and more strongly, he made a motion with his hands which I duly recognized as an invitation to me to respond. It was ignored. After another pause I became aware that he was speaking.

With regard to this statement, it is most difficult to say exactly what one means. His lips did not move. His voice reached me by some other channel than that of my ears. Yet I heard what he said. (This

phenomenon was likewise not new to me. I had previously heard what I called the inner voice, when in a *gompa* at Podang.)

He said, " You know that I am here. Why do you deny it ? "

I took no notice at all, but continued to read. Taking up a pencil from the table at my bedside, I made a marginal note.

After a while he moved from his position and came round to the side of my bed. It was hard to seem quite insensitive to this—I did not like his coming so near. He made again the recognized gesture that seemed to invite response. It attracted no notice at all.

It is difficult to say how long this ordeal lasted. It seemed to me that he stood there at least ten minutes, wholly absorbed in the desire to make me acknowledge his presence. I held out, though by this time I was in what Ted would call a blue funk. I hardly dared to wonder how this would end. The strain was acute, and I did not know how long I could go on enduring it.

That terrifying voice was calling my name : " *Honor Zangula ! Honor Zangula ! Awaken !* "

Still I made no reply.

Often though fortitude has been demanded of me, never has anything presented itself as more difficult than it then was to maintain outward indifference to the power that I felt surging about me. It seemed that Rudolf was not alone. There were intelligences —forces—allied with him ; I was alone except for Sidney, but I knew, with a glad confidence, that he was greater than any that were banded together here to break me down.

. . . Quite suddenly it was over. Rudolf's effort had failed. I could not tell what had happened, but I think that Sidney must have come to my rescue.

Anyway, I became aware that the outline of my visitor was beginning to fade. For a few moments it

remained, as if trying to rally—fighting to recover its clearness; but in vain.

As soon as he realized that he was or would soon be disintegrating, the urge to return to his body seized upon him as it invariably does.

He turned his back upon me and went out by the way he had come into the main corridor. It was as though he passed through the door with less ease than when he had entered; as if the resisting power of matter was a more real obstacle and his sub-conscious was growing feebler. . . .

I held on. With every nerve I kept myself from seeming to watch. I clutched as it were at the ascendancy which I had gained. . . .

When at last he was gone I was sensible of a terrible fatigue, or rather of exhaustion. I had not realized how grim the fight had been, nor that my soul had commandeered all my energy, psychic as well as mental, for the engagement.

I fell back against my pillows with the blessed sense of comforting arms around me. Half conscious, I felt the constraint of Sidney's well-remembered caress. A serene happiness invaded me. He was very near. I even heard the whisper, close to my ear, of the love-names that he used to call me:

"My Joy! My Dayspring! My utterly Beloved." . . .

In the security and shelter of that beloved companionship I presently sank away into dreamless sleep, and knew no more until the chiming of my carriage-clock awoke me and, starting up, I realized that the light had been burning all night and that it was nearly seven o'clock!

With triumph I knew that the battle was won! Whatever Ilianeff's suspicions had been, he must now be sure that I was no initiate.

Serenity had returned to me. Not happiness, for

still there brooded about me that sense of gloom, that weight of heart which is usually the forerunner of some misfortune, and of which I had been conscious, on and off, all the previous day.

There were clashing influences in the house—hostile intentions, malevolent wills. It all had to be faced. But now I was confident of my power to face it. I was reinforced by my knowledge of conquest.

I found Rudolf's manner, when next we met, interesting. One could sense a bewildered kind of doubt, as though he had unwillingly reverted to his first impression of me as negligible from the esoteric standpoint; but still was unwilling to believe himself mistaken in his subsequent change of opinion.

This reinforced my conviction that his appearance the previous night was completely a matter of the sub-conscious, and that in his normal state of mind he knew nothing of it.

I was more than thankful for this; it made everything much easier and, with an appreciable effort, I was able to relegate what had happened to the background of my own thought.

CHAPTER X

TARTAR'S ENEMY

THE proposed entertainment and, above all, the proposed playlet, seemed to have infused great energy into the proceedings of our young. Martin, Trix, and Ted were wholly absorbed, and I thought that Rudolf was grateful for an interest which drew public attention away from himself and the stunts he was preparing as his contribution to the entertainment.

Noel Gardner came round before we had done breakfast and proudly displayed the posters which were to cry aloud from every wall-hoarding and shop window in the district, announcing our activities.

The residents in the neighbourhood knew of old that what was undertaken by Savileas would be well done—but the cunning announcement of " Mysteries " artfully worded by Rudolf with the help of Melian Argent and Ian Blackwood, was likely to whet the public appetite beyond the ordinary.

Bella was in high good humour. Her well-run house, her clever and attractive house-party, her own astuteness in securing the lovely Melisande as a medium, all told her that she was a remarkably able woman and a most successful hostess. Her complacency made everything much easier for me, and Martin at breakfast was in better spirits than I had yet seen him, though Melisande did her best to annoy him. There had come through the post that morning for Bella one of those wonderful brochures issued by the pleasure-cruising lines, giving seductive pictures of Tahiti and the like places. These Melisande seized upon, and began to display them to Martin, saying

she had made up her mind to go to the South Seas for her honeymoon. Somebody at once asked if the wedding day was fixed yet, and Melisande, with a most unutterable look in her great eyes, languished up at her betrothed and said, "Ah! We must wait to be quite definite until after the Great Night! We can't think about anything else until the performance is over, can we, Martin, dear?"

"Certainly not," was his instant reply; "and as regards the South Seas on one of those poisonous cruises, you may count me out of that altogether. Nobody but shop-assistants and Woolworth girls would be seen dead in their bathing-pools!"

Melisande was startled. Before all things she posed as being exclusive. The idea that these cruises, which always struck her as the acme of luxury, were bad form, gave her a shock.

"Just look!" sneered Martin, pointing to a highly coloured illustration of a bathing-pool on board. "A *Lido*! What do you—or they—mean by a Lido? A resort near Venice—what's that got to do with that awful wash-pot? It's like our British vulgarians, calling every fête a carnival, because they have no idea what the word 'carnival' means! Farewell to flesh! How many of those who go to so-called carnivals, intend there and then to start a fast of forty days! Or understand that the only day on the year on which you *can* hold carnival is Shrove Tuesday?"

Ian and Noel then launched into a discussion of the last Battle of Flowers they had seen, and Melisande was hopelessly out of her depth. She tossed the cruises into the waste-paper basket and left Martin alone while she went off with Rudolf.

We were expecting the Warrens to lunch, and at about half-past twelve loud sounds as of an aeroplane flying very low were heard from the garden. Overhead appeared a jaunty little two-seater plane—one

of those they call a *Libellule*—and it was most evidently intending to alight upon our largest lawn—the one that slopes down to the ha-ha.

"My hat! What on earth is Gracie about now?" cried Ted, dashing out. It was too cold for him to open the morning-room window, so he rushed forth by way of the hall, and a bunch of the others ran after him.

The lady pilot, it must be owned, made an extraordinarily successful landing; and Ted, whose mouth was full of objurgations and cutting remarks about the sanctity of private lawns and the barbarism of aeronauts, was fain to admit that the little machine had settled herself down most cannily.

Amid a storm of chaffing comment and congratulations, Gracie was handed out, and it then appeared that with her in the cockpit was Algie Finnegan.

He was most correctly got up in a subdued sort of uniform, like the private pilot of some great family. He handed Gracie out without looking at anybody else, re-entered the machine and stooped down, busying himself over his levers or what-not. Gracie, in a wonderful get-up consisting chiefly of leather, ran towards Ted with arms outstretched.

"Sorry I had to bring him," she murmured *sotto-voce*. "I was far too nervous to try this stunt alone, and you see I've sold my car to pay for my flying lessons! He understands that he's here professionally, and you won't find he'll be a nuisance. He's going back to Baxted, and will come and fetch me whatever time you say."

Ted, who on sight of his *bête noire* had stiffened and gone red, looked slightly mollified, but only slightly. "Bit naughty of you, Gracie," he muttered. "I don't want the blighter here, as you know, and the fact of his knowing Miss Lebreton makes an awkward situation worse."

"I know, I know, my lamb," she replied cooingly; "but it's only for a few minutes. Ben is arriving in his car directly, and will run him back to Baxted at once. I told Ben to go to the stable entrance——"

Ted nodded, somewhat coldly, and Gracie squeezed his arm as she told him plaintively how wild she had been to show off her prowess in alighting.

"Send you in a bill when the frost is off the grass and we can see how many holes you've dug," was his cruel reply. "This way, Finnegan," nodding to that gentleman, who was once more emerging from the 'plane. "Onnie—take Gracie indoors, will you, while I show Finnegan the way to the stables?"

Finnegan moved towards him with an expressionless face, his wooden demeanour not betraying any kind of feeling.

It was a pretty scene: the sun was shining quite hotly from a cloudless sky and the hoar-frost upon grass and trees glittered in the light. The whole party had by now come upon the scene, including Rudolf and Melisande, the latter quite irresistible in white fur cap and coat, Rudolf dark and brooding, evidently not pleased at being dragged out into the winter weather.

Melisande waved her hand brightly to Finnegan, who touched his cap in reply.

"All right, Mr. Owen—all right, Rudolf," said she, "I'll show Mr. Finnegan the way out."

Ted stepped back with suspicious alacrity, but Rudolf hung in the wind. Melisande calmly and brightly ranged herself up beside Finnegan and walked off stable-wards with him. There was no course for Rudolf but to withdraw. The moment they were out of earshot the two began to talk in low voices to one another, and I would have given much to hear what they were saying. They rounded a long corner between plantations and passed out of our sight, but

as they entered the yard, suddenly there broke out a wild baying, and the loud voice of one of the grooms could be heard, ordering Tartar to heel. Evidently he was loose, and as evidently he did not like Finnegan. Ted set off at a run to the rescue, and I went after him. By the time we reached the scene of action, the groom had seized the dog and chained him. As we appeared he was saying apologetically :

" Never known him do that afore, sir—he never is ill-tempered or quarrelsome except with them as has no business to be here—he runs about all day with us, quiet as a lamb. I hope he didn't get you, sir ? "

Finnegan, with a white face, was looking ruefully at his smart gaiters, at which Tartar had evidently snapped. He laughed ironically. " Uniform belongs to the 'Drome, not me," he sneered. " I'll leave it to them, I think. Perhaps you will get a summons for leaving a savage dog at large."

" Tartar's not savage," said Ted shortly. " I am sorry he went for you, but are you sure you gave him no provocation ? "

" Provocation ? " cried in a trembling voice Melisande, who seemed considerably shaken. " The brute flew at him almost before he saw him, and if he had not been called off, he would have savaged him badly ! "

Ted glanced from the man to the dog, who was by no means pacified, but growling dangerously, and obviously longing to have another go.

" Well, for some reason he took a marked dislike to you, and I can only suggest that you keep clear of the yard in future," said Ted politely, eyeing Finnegan in a manner that told me he had a very shrewd idea as to the reason for the dog's enmity.

Finnegan looked deadly ; but he had plenty of self-control, and he said no more. Flashing a glance around, he touched his cap and went out of the gate

which the groom, with a sly grin, set open for him. Melisande followed him, and I mentally gave her a good mark, for it was a bit heroic. "But perhaps," I reflected, "she dare not do otherwise."

Grindlay, the chauffeur, was standing by, and he turned to Ted with a wink when the gate had closed behind the two.

"Not much doubt about who was hanging about the grounds last night, sir," he said in an amused voice. "Winded him before ever he saw him, he did." He rubbed Tartar's head affectionately. "Bright boy, ain't you?"

"What, Grindlay?" I cried in affected horror. "You can't mean that Mr. Finnegan was the tramp I sent you to chase last night in the grounds."

"Indeed and he was, ma'am, and it gives me no sort of surprise. Been hanging around here for days that chap has, and Bennett will tell you the same. Thought he come after their barmaid, Bennett did, and so did his missus; but I reckon there's more to it than that. Tell Dixon to look after her valuables, ma'am, that's my advice."

"Oh, Grindlay, you must be mistaken—why, Mr. Finnegan is a friend of Miss Lebreton," I said.

Grindlay looked me straight in the face, grave-eyed, steady. "Yes, ma'am, so it seems," he said quietly, and, touching his cap, made off at once, evidently to escape further questioning.

Ted and I looked at each other. I had done better than I knew when I sent out Grindlay to search the gardens the previous night. With Tartar loose in the darkness there would be little fear of further nocturnal visits from Mr. Finnegan.

When we got back to the garden everyone had gone indoors, for it was, in fact, very cold, and they had much to talk of and arrange.

I said to Ted as we moved towards the house,

"Evidently he has some hold on her. She has to propitiate him."

"I shouldn't wonder," he answered reflectively, "if she hasn't cooked her own hash by coming here. It was a good idea of hers, you know, if, as we suppose, the damage-money for breach was what she is after. Everyone here would see how badly Martin treated her and how angelic was her patience—only to be explained by her intense and girlish devotion! But it was a bad blunder to get Finnegan mixed up in it——"

"That is what I say. Could she help herself? If he had determined to 'sit in', she had to agree, don't you think so?"

"It really looks like it! If so, they've got to meet and have it out somehow, some time . . ."

"And Tartar looks like cramping their style," I said meditatively. "By the way, I wonder if we could do anything through Rudolf? He has such influence with her, and might have more. I wonder if I could——"

He looked swiftly at me. "You, Onnie? I don't want you to be mixed up in this. I shouldn't like it at all. Let them stew in their own juice."

I decided not to reveal the fact that Rudolf had already done his best to "mix me up" and (as I hoped) had failed in his attempt.

CHAPTER XI

GRACIE SUCCUMBS

AFTER their exit from the stable yard Melisande had not lingered that morning in Finnegan's company. She was far too wise to be late for lunch on his account; but I noticed that she looked rather strained and as though she had had to repair her wonderfully adjusted complexion. As she slipped into her place next Bella, she apologized for being somewhat out of breath. She had strolled, she said, a little way with her old playmate.

"But he could not stay long," she added in her high, clear voice, "because he is going on to lunch with his friend Lord Foyle."

The glance under her lids which accompanied this very audible announcement showed that she expected the company to be impressed : Algie, not good enough for Ted Owen, was lunching with a peer !

Unfortunately, Foyle's reputation is too notorious in the district for anyone but a stranger to suppose it to be an honour to lunch with him; and the only comment upon the news came from Bella, who looked very uncomfortable, and murmured that she hoped that the young man would be careful not to have monetary transactions with his host, "who was universally distrusted". As she spoke, I saw her glance nervously at Ted, in whose judgment she had great belief. This inkling of the shady company frequented by young Finnegan showed her nephew to have been justified in his refusal to be "matey" with Melisande's friend. Privately she determined to advise the girl to give her childhood's playmate a hint.

The subject, however, was let drop, because everyone was talking at once, and they were all so keen on what they were respectively saying that they had no time for Melisande's visiting-list, which did not interest them.

Moreover, Gracie was relating anecdotes and keeping everyone on the titter.

"My two lovely little nieces the other day," she told them, "were in the room when I was telling their Mummie how fearfully crowded the hotels were when Ben and I went to Le Touquet. 'In fact,' said I, 'the first night we got there, the management could only offer me a sofa to sleep on.' 'What is a sofa, Auntie?' says the littlest one; and 'Oh,' pipes up her sister before I could speak, 'I know! A man that drives a car!' 'And did you have to sleep with him, Aunt Gracie?'"

Nobody could help chuckling over this; and Ted, who had a friend in the Department for Poor Relief, capped the story with an authentic one of a woman who wrote to ask for assistance on the grounds of having been "in bed with the doctor for weeks".

I saw Melisande looking puzzled. She did not find the stories amusing, and was not at all sure whether she ought to laugh. She was finding it difficult to draw the line—or rather to understand where and why we drew it. She was quite without any sense of humour, and was silent for some time until Rudolf began to talk to her. Then her face lit up, and she responded at once. It could be seen that these two had seriously adopted the respective rôles of master and disciple, for I heard the girl address him shyly as "Rimpoche". This title (which means "Precious one") is seldom used, as it is only claimed by the most honoured and conspicuously holy among the mystic adepts. Rudolf himself must have taught her to say it, and it is doubtful if she knew what it

meant; or, if she did, she thought, no doubt, that she might use it with impunity, as none of the party could conceivably know the meaning of the Tibetan word.

She could see how Rudolf drank in the incense of her admiration. The more I watched her, the more I felt sure that Ted was right; that she knew her power and was deliberately exploiting the man who believed he dominated her. . . .

Yet there seemed no doubt that he attracted her in a way her other lovers did not. It made things very incalculable.

It was just a conflict between her and Martin as to which should first lose control and be the one to do the " breaking off ".

In his happy knowledge of Trix's feelings, Martin was growing a bit reckless, and I was sadly afraid that he would be the one to lose patience if suitably goaded. Nevertheless there was hope in the fact that Trix knew the exact position, and was upholding him in his efforts to force the issue from Melisande; and of the two girls Trix was far the cleverer, though not so cunning nor so callous as her rival.

We lingered a bit in the dining-room after lunch, with our coffee and cigarettes, until at last Ted jumped up and told us we must waste no more time. Then Gracie rose reluctantly and said she had been talking to Noel Gardner, who had taken her quite aback with his account of Professor Ilianeff's powers as a mesmerist. It was thrilling! She wanted to see him do one of his stunts.

" You'll see him at the Town Hall, my dear," said Ted masterfully, pulling her up from her chair.

" Oh, Teddie Bear, but I want to see him now! After all, I'm not the general public! Do let him try it on the dog! I mean, on me. I don't believe he can! Professor, could you make me do something

you wanted me to, without my knowing what it was?"

Ilianeff left his seat, came round the table, and looked at Gracie with the least little smile playing about his melancholy lips. "Yes, Mrs. Warren, I believe I could," he said in a low voice.

Gracie whooped with glee. Melisande was vexed that someone else should be getting some of her limelight. She did not feel that she was shining, and it made her pettish.

"Come," said she imperiously to Martin, "take me for a little walk before the daylight goes."

"Not now," replied Martin calmly. "I want to see Ilianeff do his stuff. Gracie will be a harder nut to crack than he found you."

"Oh, do you think so?" cried Gracie, delighted; but Ilianeff said quietly that he could attempt nothing if the proposed medium set herself against him.

"Of course," said Ted. "You must be a good girl, Gracie, or I'll march you off to rehearsal."

"O.K., boy dear," said Gracie meekly; "I'll do exactly as I'm bid."

She was seated by the refectory table, but sideways, not with her knees under the oak. Rudolf stood beside her, both his knuckles resting on the table, one touching her hand, which was lying along the edge.

"Look at me, please, and try to think about me," he told her in the same quiet tones, impersonal and cool.

Gracie obeyed. She began by giggling nervously, but something in his silent dignity hushed her. I saw a transient look of apprehension flit across her irregular but attractive face. Her eyes then became fixed, a glazed look grew in them. The *doukhob* did not move. In the succeeding pause, which seemed rather long, I could hear Melian panting.

Then Gracie rose. There was a vase holding helio-

trope on the table before her. She deftly extracted a bit, turning from her place, went over to Teddie, and fitted the flower carefully in his button-hole. Then she returned to her seat. Rudolf made a swift pass with his two hands before her face. She looked up surprised :

"I've been asleep."

We all laughed.

"Anyway," said she triumphantly, "I haven't done anything!"

"Oh! Oh! Oh!"

Several people at once started in to tell her what she had done, and Ted pointed proudly to his coat lapel. Then everyone hurried out, laughing and talking. Ben Warren had not been quite pleased when the experiment began, but it was so totally void of offence that he was obviously relieved.

"Yet," he said to me, "a man with a power like that is a man to beware of. I should always feel he needed watching."

"He's mostly very tractable," I told him reassuringly, unable to resist the thought of how I could scare them if I chose with the story of my nocturnal visitor. "Only," I reflected, "they wouldn't believe me. I suppose I really am sure myself that I saw him?" Then I recalled that feeling of unseen powers, and was certain of its having been no dream.

Ben was a tremendous gossip, and we knew that in a few hours the story of our wonderful guest would be all round the neighbourhood. A crowded house for our show would be assured, and Noel would be gratified, if nobody else was, for it was usually a work of some difficulty adequately to fill the Coronation Hall in our small and scattered district in winter-time!

The little play that was in preparation was called "The Wicked Uncle", and as we left the dining-room I was commandeered by the cast to come and

help them rehearse, and to prompt. I went off, nothing loath, for they were all intelligent, and well worth polishing. Moreover they paid attention to what I said, which is far from being always the case with amateurs.

We put in some good work that afternoon, making hay while the sun shone—in other words, while I was available; for the following day was Bella's grand New Year's Dinner-Party, and I should not have a moment's leisure. After rehearsing we went off to find Bella, as we wanted her to lend something suitable in which to equip Gracie for her elderly part. We found her in her huge, over-furnished Victorian bedroom, having finished her afternoon siesta.

Teresa was called and pressed into the service, proving full of zeal and helpful suggestions. Bella had stores of ancient clothing—Gracie called them "museum pieces"—and over these we made merry, Bella seated by her bedroom fire, laughing till the tears came, while Trix and Teresa attired Mrs. Warren in one thing after another.

While Trix was kneeling on the floor, examining the hem of a wonderful brocade in which Gracie really looked most imposing—to see if it could be let down—Teresa approached me as I was bending over a trunk at the far end of the room, she coming close she said in a very low voice, almost a whisper:

"Has Miss Lebreton said anything to you, ma'am?"

I looked up quickly. Teresa and I are very good friends. "Anything about what?" I asked sharply.

"About being disturbed in the night, ma'am?"

I had a slight sense of shock. "No," I said. "Nothing of the kind. *Was* she disturbed in the night?"

"She rang her bell, ma'am."

"What time was that?"

"Soon after half-past two it was. Woke me with a start it did, and I went straight to her room."

"Yes?"

"She had her light on——"

"Yes?"

"She was all of a dither, and she said someone had come into her room. I asked her who it was, and she said she couldn't see. 'Well,' I said, 'but how could anyone get in, seeing that your door was bolted, so that I had to knock until you came and opened it?' 'Why,' said she, 'of course it was! How stupid of me! Oh, but what about the bathroom door?' I went through then and tried the outer bathroom door myself. It was fast shut and bolted, and I said it must be all her fancy."

I pondered. "And did she agree to that?"

"Yes, I think so. She asked for a drop of brandy, and I got her some. If you'll excuse my mentioning it, ma'am, I think she's a bit too free with the spirits for such a young girl. Grindlay says she had a very strong nightcap before coming upstairs—but she was cold and shivery, and I got her a nip. She tossed it off like water."

I thought for a while and then asked: "Do you think she was really frightened? Or was she wanting to make a sensation? She's a very good actress you know."

"I couldn't say for certain," pondered Teresa, "but I think she was really frightened. She was very white, and she had me try the windows as well as the doors before she was satisfied. Then at last she seemed to think it was all right, and that she had had a nightmare, and she begged and prayed me not to say a thing to Mrs. Owen about it. Said she didn't want to make a fuss, and was very grateful to me."

"Well, she has kept it very quiet, so it may have been genuine. If she wanted to have it known, she

would have acted differently. I am glad you told me, however: I don't want you to have your rest disturbed."

"If you ask me, ma'am, I think she's a bit off her balance with that hypnotizing," said Teresa, very wisely. "At it most of the day they are, and poor Miss Argent, who, I understand, is engaged to the foreign gentleman, she has to play second fiddle. Of course Miss Lebreton is a looker and no mistake, though her own young man, Mr. Rhodes, doesn't seem to think so."

It was difficult to know exactly how to answer this very apt criticism. I said that I could not help agreeing with Teresa that the hypnotizing was an unnerving kind of thing.

"When they began it I did not expect they would take it so seriously," I said, "and now that their performance is being so advertised and talked about, there seems nothing for it but to let them go on. If Mr. Rhodes or Miss Argent disliked the business it would be different, but neither of them seems to object in any way. Obviously, if Miss Lebreton's health suffers we should have to put a stop to it. But she herself is very keen about it, and after all she is young and strong. It will all be over in a few days, and let us hope that after that things will return to normal."

"As you say, let's hope so, ma'am," was the reply, in tones which implied considerable doubt.

"And meanwhile, if Miss Lebreton rings you up again in the night, fetch me at once, please."

At this moment Trix called loudly for safety-pins, and with a nod of understanding to me, Teresa went to her aid.

Pondering the thing, I was inclined to believe that Melisande's alarm was genuine. Had Rudolf fulfilled his threat of entering her room? If so, his plan

had miscarried, for I was certain that he was not the visitor whom she feared.

No. Her terror was lest Finnegan had somehow forced his way in. That their interview that day had been stormy seemed obvious. He was then, as I had felt sure, in a positon to bully her, and I pictured her as searching round to find some way to circumvent him. She was quick enough to see that she cut very little ice with the young men at Savileas. Ilianeff was a different matter. There was much of pose and pretence in her attitude towards him, but she knew that she had an extraordinary effect upon him. To put it shortly, the man was wildly in love, and she must be searching for some way of rendering his passion useful to the furthering of her plans. Alas! Nothing would arouse the jealousy of her betrothed husband! That was useless. But I guessed that she might be speculating as to whether Ilianeff might come to the rescue by being made to do something to render Finnegan powerless.

It was hard to see what would be possible in this direction. Nothing short of an elopement with Ilianeff—who might perhaps be induced to rob a safe in order to furnish means—would be of any avail; and Bella had no fortune kept in a safe—no jewels of fabulous value—only the usual kind of thing, suitable to a house and a fortune of moderate rank.

It was easy to guess that Melisande was tired of Finnegan, and that Finnegan was determined that she should not escape him. The blackmailing of Martin was their one hope, and he was going to see that she carried it through. . . .

I caught myself up with a start. Wild surmise, all of this! But Melisande was as cunning as a snake, and I felt it was time that something was done by way of a counter-plot.

CHAPTER XII

MARTIN'S NEW IDEA

At half-past three that afternoon, Finnegan returned to Savileas as arranged, to help Gracie to take off—no easy matter, if the flower-beds were not to be massacred.

Only Ben saw him, for the Warrens were both staying on to dinner, so Finnegan was instructed to fly the 'plane back, as Mr. Warren had his car with him and could drive his wife home.

Finnegan was a most able pilot, and certainly the *Libellule* needed but a short run. In his deft hands she actually skimmed the ha-ha and took the air in the field beyond with almost as little effort as the insect whose name she bears.

But Bella was inclined to be somewhat annoyed, for, when the machine was gone, it could be seen that the lawn had suffered. However, she was fond of the Warrens, and accepted Ben's rueful apologies with a good grace, saying it mattered less in winter-time.

At tea-time I managed to convey to Trix and Martin an invitation to come to my sitting-room afterwards for a few minutes chat.

They came accordingly, and Martin, who had not visited me there before, looked round him with approval and interest.

"What a congenial kind of room!" said he. "Is it my fancy, or is there actually a special atmosphere of . . . what is it? Comfort, or calm, or peace? . . .; Anyhow, it is something that expresses Mrs. Zangula."

"Thank you for a most magnificent compliment, young man! Ted and Trix agree with you more or less, I believe," I smiled.

Trix nodded. "Oh yes, Onnie was always our ideal of a haven from storm, a peaceful interlude in life's weary round——"

"Come, come, young woman, no posing! Life's not a weary round to you, and you know it, and I know it, and probably Martin knows it——"

"You're right, of course; it's not! If it isn't 'one grand sweet song', at least it's a most attractive adventure," she corrected herself dreamily.

Young Rhodes was roaming about the room, studying some of my oriental carved furniture, which is really very choice if you happen to be a connoisseur. "Who is the magnificent man?" he asked, stopping before Sidney's portrait. "The man who looks as if he held the Central Secret, if you know what I mean."

"Oh!" said Trix eagerly, "that's Onnie's husband —Professor Zangula! He died just too soon to be Sir Sidney Zangula, more's the pity! There were all kinds of honours in store for him if he had lived. I can only just remember him—I was a very little girl when he passed on—but I do remember what sympathy he had with children. He was wonderful."

"That's just what he looks—wonderful! Why do men like that have to die young?" Martin hesitated, looking at me with genuine sympathy. "Does it hurt you to talk about him?"

I laughed softly. "Hurt me? The trouble is that if I start talking of him it's so hard to leave off!—But I think we won't begin now, because I haven't long to spare, and I have something particular to say to you two."

"We also have something to tell you," cut in Trix. "I've assured Martin that you are absolutely safe and secret, that nothing we tell you can by any chance go farther, and he is quite willing you should know that we are definitely and absolutely engaged,—only, before announcing it, we want, if we can, to force

Melisande to free Martin. Of course, if she won't he'll have to jilt her: but we are anxious to avoid what Martin calls a 'show-down', if we can, because of Martin's pater."

"Also," added Martin urgently, "because if she does do the breach-of-promise stunt and rakes off big damages, it will cripple me so badly financially; and I don't want to live on my wife. Trix can't see it; but she has got to respect my scruples—don't you agree?"

"Yes, Trix," I told her, "you must be patient for a while. I quite see Martin's point of view. Moreover, I have two ideas that I want to put before you; two ways of breaking the knot which you had better consider. One is that, as you may have noticed, the fair lady is much attracted by Rudolf Ilianeff; and he has fallen deeply in love with her."

They shook their heads a little over this. Martin said that Melisande could never conceivably be in love with anyone but herself; and Trix wanted to know why I thought Rudolf had fallen for her. "I know you're frightfully observant, Onnie," said she, "but what have you to go on in this matter?"

I told them what I had seen in the conservatory. "Of course," I owned, "I am a back number alike in manners and morals. It may be only pretty Fanny's way, but it looked to me much more serious than that. How much in earnest they are—whether either or both is just playing with fire—of course it is difficult to say; but they are certainly conducting a very sudden and somewhat excessive flirtation, to put it mildly."

Martin shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing in it," was his opinion. "That chap Ilianeff is out for the shekels, or I'm much mistaken; and Melisande is not a gilded prize."

"Quite," agreed Trix. "Melian is much better

worth having from the financial standpoint. But does he know that? Melisande arrived here driving her own car and looking most expensive, didn't she? He probably takes her wealth for granted."

"Well," I said, "I shan't disillusionize him."

"No, but I think Melian will," murmured Trix.

"It may be too late," I suggested. "Ilianeff is a man of strong passions who has never let himself go. At least, as you will agree, he isn't a bit in love with Melian. Melisande may not be in love with him, but he can and does dominate her. I feel sure that Finnegan saw them last night in the conservatory, and that there was a flaming row to-day. She had evidently been crying before she came in to lunch——"

"Onnie, you speak as if you were sure that Finnegan has the right to haul her over the coals. I should have thought she could snap her fingers at him."

"No, she can't," I replied. "I happen to know that she is either his mistress or his wife. I think the latter."

"You *know* it, Onnie?"

"Yes; I can't tell you how I know, but you may take it from me that he has the whip hand. She is terribly afraid of him."

"But surely," murmured Trix, "if she's his wife, he wouldn't have let her get engaged to Martin."

"I should think the plan was quite half his. They have no money, and they want to set up house together. What better way to raise the wind?"

"You mean, she has never intended, all along, to marry Martin?"

"No. She merely means to force him to break with her, and collect the result."

Martin began to laugh. "You mean, if I were to call her bluff and beg her to name the day, she would be in a jam."

"I think so," I replied, "but of course they must be fairly confident that nothing could be brought against them, or they would not have taken the risk. They might actually allow the marriage to take place, in which case you would have to be accidentally killed —a course which they might consider uncomfortable and dangerous. But to take such a risk would not be needful if you were in a position to prove the previous marriage."

"How could we do that?"

"You would have to engage some professional to inquire into the antecedents of both of them; find out where they have lived, and have the registers searched. What pointers could you give, Martin? What, if anything, do you know about the young lady's past?"

"Only what she has told me, and of course that is all lies," replied Martin moodily.

"What has she told you, laddie?" asked Trix patiently.

Unwillingly he repeated what he could remember. She had said her father was the victim of calumny—he was a jockey, and was accused of pulling a horse. "Of course she vowed there was no truth in it, but I'm afraid—well, after I got engaged to her, I found that he had not borne a good name even before his final exit."

"Ted says his name was Pumps, so it is possible that Melisande may have been married under that name," suggested Trix.

"It is rather likely that she might, because, although the use of a false name doesn't invalidate a marriage, it is always wiser not to assume an alias," I reflected aloud. "Finnegan would almost certainly have used his own name. My idea is that old Lebreton —or Pumps—does not know of the marriage. He is probably blissfully certain that his daughter is going

to marry a toff, and that he will be able to sponge on his son-in-law throughout a golden future."

"I can't think," threw in Martin, "where they got the idea of our being so coiny. Rannow is a nice little place, but it takes a devil of a lot of keeping up. The shelling out of a lump sum would cripple my dear old boy sadly."

I smiled, remembering how I had heard Melisande lament over the telephone that she had not tried for Ted. Also I recalled that Finnegan had not thought she could have brought it off so easily with young Owen; but this I dare not divulge.

"If I were Martin, I would get busy at once," I urged. "Go to some Private Inquiry Agency and set them on the job. Give them all the information you can. Do you know how long Lebreton has kept the pub at Darnley?"

"Not so very long, I fancy. Some of the fellows at the 'Drome used to complain of the change, and said he was a sweep. Unluckily I was so green that I never thought of her being soiled with the sweep's brush."

"She never told you where they lived before coming there? Because that would make all the difference as to where they are likely to have been married."

"I don't think she did," said Martin, holding his head and making a noble effort to recollect. "I suppose I never really took much notice of what she said. But it's in my mind that she once let slip something that sounded as though she had at one time been a barmaid. If she had not somewhat obviously tried to cover the slip, I might not have noticed. Now where was the place? She mentioned it once as part of her happy lost childhood. Somewhere that tourists go—some watering-place. I have it! It was Bowness, on Windermere—"Lady of the

Lake" Hotel! Odd that that should stick in my mind. . . . I don't remember what she said or how I knew that she had had something to do with that hotel, but it seems to glimmer in my memory like a light a long way off."

"As a drowning man, coming up for the last time, sees something to clutch," said Trix solemnly. "It may mean your salvation—your rescue—your freedom, Martin!"

"In any case, you can try it! I can tell you of some quite good people to employ——" I put in eagerly.

We discussed this plan for a while, and I produced a name and address which I had hunted up, having kept it in case of need from a time when friends of mine were in difficulties and had used the service in question with excellent results.

"Of course it will cost you something," I warned Martin, "but nothing like what you would have to pay if it comes to buying her off, even if you kept it out of court."

Martin kindled at the idea, wondering that he had never thought of it before. The hope of rescue from his deadly predicament was encouraging. He was terrified every day lest he should find that somebody had told his father that he was engaged, which would hurt the Colonel terribly.

"All right, go to it, my lad," urged Trix. "I know Onnie will lend you her telephone. Sit down right now, as our cousins have it, and call up these people."

He caught at the suggestion. At that time of day it did not take long to get his connection, and he had a most satisfactory talk with one of the principals of the firm—Willis and Mills. To his relief, they thought a personal interview at that point unnecessary. If photos could be supplied, names and dates given, they would send off representatives at once to Darnley and

also to Bowness. They were confident of being able to find plenty of evidence of the racing career and former domicile of the *ci-devant* Mr. Pumps. Martin promised to post a photo of the lady at once, suggesting that if they sent a representative to Baxted, it would be easy to obtain a sight of Mr. Finnegan.

After giving definite instructions to begin inquiries at once, Martin rang off, greatly excited at this hope of escape from his *impasse*.

"If there's no result—if they cannot unearth anything—then we fall back upon her behaviour with Ilianeff," said Trix. "Onnie, you must watch them both carefully——"

"And so shall I," chimed in Martin. "If I could catch that Jugo-Slav bending, no jury would give a verdict for her. I should be held to be completely justified in breaking it off."

"She's not quite happy about it herself," murmured Trix. "I am sure she meant to be extremely circumspect, and as far as her behaviour in public goes, she has kept on the rails. The knowledge that her Finnegan spied her canoodling must be a nasty blow."

I confirmed this. "Yes, it was a blow. She was much disturbed. Finnegan's surveillance is definitely cramping her style, and I don't quite see what she is going to do about it. He is not going to be made a fool of. I gather he is still in love with her, though no doubt she tired of him long ago, and I don't fancy it would take much to bring him to the point of putting his foot down."

"She was doubtless young and less shrewd than she now is when she allowed him to get the upper hand! Now he is just a millstone round her neck, and it must be maddening for her. If she were a different type of woman she might put arsenic in his whisky, but I don't think she's what they call a killer—not enough pluck. If wishing him dead would be

enough, I wouldn't give much for his chances; but she wouldn't do it herself."

Martin agreed. "No more than I would do her in by violent methods; but you know, if intention counts, I am a potential murderer. I own frankly that I wish she were dead."

"No, Martin," I told him; "that's over-stating the case. If you could cut the knot of your bondage, you would willingly leave her to be happy in her own way. You don't want her blood."

"Do I?" he wondered. "I really can't be sure. I do hate her pretty thoroughly. She makes me so ashamed—to think that I could ever have fallen to such a cheap lure!—— But if she were somehow removed, I really don't think I should pause to consider how it had been managed. I should just go off my head with joy."

CHAPTER XIII

HYPNOTIZING BELLA

THAT night, the only additions to our home-party being the Warrens and Noel Gardner, we had an evening of sheer frivolity.

Childish games, such as Musical Chairs and Birds, Beasts, and Fishes, were played, and it was amusing to observe Rudolf, who was very stiff to start with, growing younger and more irresponsible every moment.

I watched Melisande very closely. Evidently she had never before taken part in such romps—at least, not since her childhood—but after the first hesitation she enjoyed it, and floated about in a gown of apricot-coloured chiffon, looking rather like a Fra Angelico angel. Her fairness and slimness combined to produce an effect of extreme girlishness. She would have passed for nineteen, easily. Studying her, I thought she might have made a living out of dancing, so graceful were her movements. She must have taken some course of eurhythmics. It was not wonderful that Bella called Martin the luckiest of men, or that Noel Gardner remarked to me confidentially that he had never before seen so lovely a girl alive. He thought such creatures belonged to the realms of fairyland. Even I felt that Martin's tragic blunder could be understood.

The Beauty showed herself utterly stupid at any form of competition, and, as Gracie insisted upon having forfeits, she speedily earned several. When the games were over, Gracie was appointed " Executioner " to see that the forfeits were duly paid.

She searched her memory for silly penalties, such

as "Set two chairs back to back, take off your shoes and jump over them."

This punishment was inflicted upon Noel Gardner, who was quite equal to the occasion. He apologized for removing his footgear in the drawing-room, but slipped them off so rapidly, jumped over them so speedily, and put them on again so immediately, that Bella could not see what had been done, and it had to be carefully explained to her.

Melisande, who followed, was sentenced to bow to the wittiest, kneel to the prettiest, and kiss the one she loved the best. After a moment's thought she bowed to Gracie, knelt to Trix, and then, with a charming blend of coquetry and shyness in her manner, walked up to Martin and saluted him gravely, standing a-tiptoe, with her hands upon his shoulders.

It was adroitly done, and everyone applauded all three choices; except Rudolf, who looked on with smouldering jealousy.

He was the last to be called up for sentence, and Gracie, in huge delight, ordered him to give the assembled company a specimen of his magic powers.

He smiled. "You give me *carte blanche*, Madame?"

"Only stipulating that it shan't take too long."

"Then I will stand there at that end of the room and summon one of you ladies to come to me," said Rudolf. "I shall exclude Miss Argent, as some of you might suspect us of collusion if I am successful."

He went to the far end of the room amid a murmur of laughing comment.

"Silence, please," said he. "I ask that nobody moves nor speaks."

Folding his arms, he stood there, very quietly. He looked down at the floor, not at anyone in particular. There was a pause, which lengthened out, and I saw that Melisande was distressed. Her bosom was heaving and she looked away—evidently she

was in deadly fear lest he call her and she should be unable to resist. Then there was a movement. Someone was rising from her seat. Melisande started, and a look of relief stole over her face. Turning her head, she stared transfixed upon the sight of Bella, my sister, in red velvet and garnets, advancing stately and alone across the floor until she was near enough to the hypnotist to hold out her hand. Without raising his eyes, Ilianeff took and kissed the hand.

"Gracious lady," he murmured, "how can I thank you for your amazing kindness and condescension?"

"Well! Why! What!" was the gasping comment that came from Mrs. Owen. "How wonderful you are, young man! To think that I——at my age——"

She began to laugh, and I, fearing she might grow hysterical—for she was evidently excited and overwrought—cried out that we were now going to dance Sir Roger de Coverley.

Rudolf begged the honour of Bella as his partner, and led her off in triumph.

"By Jove, though, he *is* uncanny," murmured Gracie.

* * * * *

Later in the evening several of the party went into the winter-garden, to look upon the scene of the alarm of the previous night. It was known that I had ordered Grindlay to make the round every night in future with Tartar. Evidently Melisande had warned Finnegan of this, for she seemed to have lost her nervous apprehension. As the evening wore on it was evident that a new complication was developing around our modern Helen of Troy. Steady-going old Noel, the tepid middle-aged bachelor, had gone down before her. Ted was much amused. He thought the launching of a thousand ships was quite a minor

achievement compared with the kindling of passion in the breast of the boy-scout chief !

Ilianeff, however, found it the reverse of amusing. It was quite a long time before he could shake off Noel, who, happy in the knowledge that his goddess was already betrothed (which he fatuously imagined made him quite safe), attached himself to her side. The fair lady, ever avid of new conquests, was, in Rudolf's view, far too kind to him.

At last I took pity on the *doukhob*. I did not want to see him losing his ascendancy in that quarter. I had been dragged into the winter-garden to point out the exact place at which I had seen the face looking in at the window. Gracie got Ted to go outside with her, leaving Noel Gardner and myself seated on the couch just where Rudolf and Melisande had sat the previous evening. They came back crying out that there was an excellent view, and hoping that the pair had been quite circumspect in their behaviour.

"Suppose the intruder were a prying journalist !" suggested Gracie unkindly. "We should have a spicy par. in the *Baxted and County Weekly* ! 'It is rumoured——' Martin would have to sue the editor for libel !"

"Oh, do hold your silly tongue !" cried Ted. "Who would think a woman grown like you could be such an idiot? The prowler was just a tramp—a dishonest tramp ! He wouldn't have the wits to see a chance of blackmail !"

"Oh, but it's so often done nowadays," said Gracie. "You just read a few American detective stories and hear how they manage it over there—coaxing you down to a road-house and making you a bit squiffy, and then all of a sudden the flashlight ! There you are ! You pay to keep that snapshot out of the papers !"

"Noel and Onnie look very tempting!" cried Ben. "Wish I had my camera!"

To my amusement, Noel jumped up in a panic. "That wouldn't do at all!" he cried. He was right, of course. All his influence depended upon his reputation for steady-going blamelessness. They teased him a bit, and in his revulsion of feeling I was able to persuade him to go and play bridge in the drawing-room instead of sitting in Melisande's pocket. He went off, and almost immediately Rudolf and Melisande also disappeared from view. As they strolled away very slowly and unostentatiously, I heard him say:

"You don't know your power. Why drive that poor old chap mad?"

I also heard her small, tremulous laugh, the laugh of one who hides a secret wound:

"If the man you love neglects you, it raises up a devil in you—at least it does in me——"

I also heard the beginning of his rejoinder as they moved rapidly out of earshot:

"The man you love?—Don't tell me . . ."

I could fill in the rest of what he said!

It began to seem as though Rudolf had no illusions about the woman who had bewitched him. He was mad for her in spite of what she was, not because of what he imagined her to be. That made him far more dangerous.

It was also true, no doubt, of Finnegan. Here were two men enslaved to one whom they both knew to be false. She had held Finnegan also in the hollow of her hand, but if my guess was right (and I was beginning to feel sure it was), she had been rash enough to give him a hold over her. What of Rudolf? Had he or she the upper hand at the present moment?

From Ilianeff's tone I felt quite sure that she had made him very angry by flirting with Noel, and also

that he meant to give her a piece of his mind. I should have loved to hear it !

But they had vanished down the green alley under the stooping palm branches—vanished so deftly that without following them it would be hopeless to see whither they had gone. Rudolf might have been exerting his magic powers so as to screen them from observation. I wondered a good deal how far those powers of his went—whether he really could cast some illusion over one's sight—the sight of the mind, not the eye. I was beginning to think him rather formidable.

But is a man ever capable of such depths of dissimulation as a woman? I was still inclined to back Melisande if it came to a clash of wills.

When we finally separated that night, it was found that Miss Lebreton had already gone to bed. She smiled sweetly from under her down quilt upon Trix, who peeped in to make sure she was safely there.

"Yes," she said. "I slipped off. Mr. Gardner was making himself a bit silly, and I thought it best not to appear again. I hope I haven't made you anxious? I never thought of that!"

* * * * *

After this several days passed in which I find little to chronicle.

The big dinner-party took place in a blaze of splendour; and, to my relief, none of the heavy silver dishes was dropped nor any of the costly wines spilt.

"Mrs. Owen does know how to entertain," said the county; and Bella swelled with gratification, though I received a trouncing because of some instructions I had given Grindlay with regard to the parking of cars. However, nobody heard her but me, and the regulations in question had done so much to

make things go smoothly that I really didn't mind a bit.

I handed her all the *kudos*, and was content to continue my rôle of the lady housekeeper, which kept me so conveniently in the background and enabled me, as a looker-on, to see the game from my chosen standpoint.

Ilianeff had seen through that part of my pose from the very first. He almost at once realized that Bella was a cipher, that the whole motive-power of the household centred in myself, and that Ted and Trix were both well aware of this and more than content that so it should be.

I was still in doubt as to how far he himself was able consciously to remember his intrusion into my room. On the whole I was still inclined to believe that when awake he knew nothing about it. In order to hide my knowledge from him, I was obliged to refrain from ever talking to him of his occult culture. I could not question him upon the subject of his *kyilkhor*, nor find out by any other means how far he had progressed along the mystic way. But there could be no doubt of his being an adept of considerable attainments.

I walked very warily; and as the days slipped by, more and more so, because the warring elements in the house were beginning to cause me anxiety.

I could see that Melisande had worked upon Rudolf to the extent of setting him to work on Martin; and there was danger in that course.

Martin was of a very downright disposition. In all ways he was a curious contrast to Trix, and their devotion very much a case of the attraction of opposites. The idea that he could come under any kind of hypnotic compulsion simply never presented itself to him as possible.

But an odd thing happened.

Most of us were sitting about in the lounge before

going up to dress for dinner. Martin and Ian Blackwood were playing piquet at a very small table. Rudolf was present, and appeared to be reading the evening paper with interest. Melian was near him, doing some embroidery. This was her one feminine accomplishment, and she was a mistress of her art. I happened to be studying Martin, for he was in a frame of mind that made me vaguely anxious. Quite suddenly, for no apparent reason, he rose from the table, pushed back his chair, went to the fireplace, took up a log, which he placed on the fire, and returned without a word to his seat.

It does not sound a very remarkable proceeding, but it was. Not only was the fire in no need of stoking, but I should have sworn the young man's mind was miles away from any such idea. I had never before seen him mend the fire, which indeed was always so well attended to by Dixon that there was no call for amateur stokers. Ian raised his head and stared, evidently surprised. Martin made no apology at all for leaving his game, merely picked up his hand, looked at it, and asked for two cards. But I did not miss the glance that passed between Rudolf and Melisande—swift, but significant.

So! The tentacles of the mesmerist were about Martin, and he was apparently unconscious of it. He was to be made to break off his engagement. Shadowy as was the tie, Rudolf could not suffer it any longer.

But Rudolf and Melisande were not aware of the perfect correspondence between Martin and Trix. It was not only Martin's opposition to his mastery, but that of Beatrix as well that the *doukhob* had to fight. But Rudolf was, as it were, pursuing two plans of campaign. It was more than the silent compulsion of Martin's will that had to be accomplished: there was also the perpetual corroding poison of Martin's

hatred of Melisande, fanned by her continually into flame.

Oh, how he hated her! How every glance of her large soft eyes, filled with unshed tears by his neglect; every sad little appeal—"Martin—*darling—are you* listening? I don't believe you heard a word I said," or "Martin, do come out with me and look at the pups in the garage—such little loves! I do love baby things!"

You could see the bitter words—the curses almost—rushing to the goaded man's lips and choked back! Melisande! Who would probably have taken any risk, suffered any pain to escape the chances of motherhood! Loved baby things, did she?

As he said afterwards to Trix, who told me, "I was a baby thing! A callow undergraduate knowing nothing at all of love, and even less of women. She pulled off my wings, she cut me up, she scalded me and froze me, and finally trod me underfoot! May she get her deserts!"

"Such women as she never do," sighed Trix.

CHAPTER XIV

ENTER CANNING

GRACIE WARREN was progressing with her flying, in spite of the time she had to give to rehearsals. She had a flair for it, and was most anxious to qualify, so as to be able to volunteer for service should there be another war—which God forbid !

Ted had for some time intended to build himself a hangar on his land, where there was plenty of space. He did not fancy beginning work upon this scheme in the middle of winter, but, in view of Gracie's requirements, he selected a site, and had a landing-ground marked out with white boundaries and equipped with flares so that she could alight without encroaching upon any of the lawns !

She was delighted at Ted's attention. Having perceived that Finnegan was, to say the least of it, not *persona grata* at Savileas, next time she came by air she brought a different instructor from Baxted. He was a new arrival—age in the middle thirties, I guessed—a big, heavy man called Canning. He was efficient and rather silent—by no means a charmer, like Melisande's childhood friend.

Melisande had, since the last occasion of Finnegan's coming, carefully avoided anything to do with the flying, and was not among those who came to witness Gracie's next landing. The reception committee on that occasion consisted of Ted and Trix—also Martin because Trix was there, and myself because I was usually commandeered to attend Ted wherever he went.

When Canning stepped out, Ted looked relieved.

Gracie introduced her new escort as the late winner of a local air race. I had seen his name in the papers, so thought it courteous to exchange a few words of a neutral kind with him.

He was a curious-looking man, being very dark—foreign-looking, in fact—but with eyes of such a light brown you might have called them beige—like shallow water flowing on a sandy bed. They were reminiscent of a snake's eyes, seeming to flicker all ways at once. He asked if I was interested in aeronautics, and I said, " Not particularly," on which he laughingly remarked that it was refreshing to hear that, as everyone he spoke to either was really absorbed in flying, or pretended to be.

" Young Mr. Owen is good, isn't he? " he asked.

I said I believed so. He had flown a good deal, and meant to take it up more seriously when he came down from Oxford next year.

His predatory eyes roamed speculatively over the group. Then he looked at me tentatively, wondering whether to risk his next question or not, took the plunge and asked, " Got a Miss Lebreton staying here, haven't you? "

I eyed him squarely. " Yes. Do you know her? "

He gave a low, secret-sounding laugh. " I used to. They tell me at the 'Drome that she's a friend of a man called Algie Finnegan, but engaged to someone called Rhodes."

" I understand that she is engaged to Mr. Rhodes," I replied repressively, " but I know very little about her."

His eyes rested on me speculatively. " Forgive me if I'm impertinent, but are you Mrs. Owen? "

" No. Mrs. Owen is my sister," I told him; and at the moment Gracie came up to us and dismissed her pilot, telling him to fly back to Baxted, as she

would be motored home and would not want the *Libellule* until the following morning.

Canning raised his hat and returned to the 'plane. We all strolled back to the house together.

Nobody mentioned Canning at lunch, which was a hilarious meal. Afterwards, finding myself next to Melisande as we all stood about waiting for the men to bring us our coffee, I said lightly :

"I had an inquiry after you this morning from another old friend—at least, an aviator who said he used to know you."

She looked a bit scornful, but she looked wary too. "Oh? Who was that, I wonder? There are so many hands in the garage at Darnley."

"His name is Canning," I said, watching her intently.

Her self-possession was always great, but it was evident that this was startling news. Her expression hardly changed, but she lost colour. "Canning?" Her voice was carefully controlled. "I seem to remember the name, but I thought he was abroad. . . . What is he doing here?"

"He came with Mrs. Warren—flew here with her. I fancy he must have joined the staff at Baxted Aerodrome."

She gave a little vexed laugh. "Everyone seems to take to flying nowadays! Of course I know most of the Darnley men by sight, but I can't say I am anxious to renew acquaintance with any of them."

Martin brought her coffee and went off to care for someone else. I had shot my bolt and watched her reaction, so I strolled away. A reaction there had certainly been : she had been shocked, but I could not say exactly why I felt sure that she was shaken badly.

That evening Martin heard from his inquiry agency, and he, Trix, Ted, and I met in my room to hear what they had to say. They were unearthing plenty of

information respecting both old Lebreton and his daughter, and they begged Mr. Rhodes to come to town for an interview and hear what they had to tell him.

Rehearsals being in full swing, Martin did not wish to be away for long, and to save time he determined, weather permitting, to fly to town the following morning, accompanied by Ted, and return the same day.

Trix and I volunteered to drive to Baxted after an early breakfast and see the fliers off. I invited Melisande to come too, but was not surprised at her uncompromising refusal. There was plenty of room in the Daimler, and her presence would have been most unwelcome to Trix and Martin, so there must have been a strong motive for her declining. I scolded myself for having let out to her the previous day the fact of Canning's appearance. We might have gained some valuable information.

On reaching the 'Drome we found Canning standing by Ted's machine. The mechanic had been tuning it up, and the new instructor was admiring and examining it. Finnegan was not in sight. It interested me to find that evidently neither Martin nor Ted knew anything of Canning—except for their momentary glimpse of him the previous day at Savileas.

He saluted me and expressed his admiration of the charming 'plane. I acknowledged his greeting, noting how keenly he eyed Trix. It seemed likely that he had supposed that Melisande might have come to see Martin off, and was disappointed—perhaps annoyed—that she had not done so.

His manners, though not at all forthcoming, were quite good. There was no doubt at all of his being a gentleman, though I did not take to him. He seemed hard, perhaps embittered. One wondered why he was just an instructor, at his age.

With a somewhat mischievous desire to make him reveal himself, I said to Martin, " Mr. Canning told me yesterday that he knows Miss Lebreton."

Canning turned his odd reptilian eyes on Martin, but said nothing.

Martin remarked casually, " Oh ! Is that so? " and went on with what he was doing—some slight mechanical adjustment of the 'plane. " At Darnley, I suppose? " he subjoined after a pause.

Canning sent a look round which I interpreted as a desire to be sure that Finnegan was out of earshot. Then he replied quietly : " No. I was never at Darnley. It was in the north of England that we met."

Colourless though his tone was, a subtle suggestion of contempt made itself felt. I guessed that he was one of the siren's victims and held a jaundiced view.

At those words, however, " in the north of England ", Martin raised his eyes and looked for the first time at Canning as if he saw him : " Indeed? At Bowness, was it? "

" That's it," said Canning, with the flicker of an unpleasing smile about his thick lips.

I could see that this item of news interested Martin. Though he said no more, a look passed between us. He swung himself into the cockpit, and I took Ted aside a pace or two.

" He knows something, and I'm sure he's no friend to Melisande," I murmured.

" Quite," nodded Ted. " We'll see what can be done about that."

After they had made their start, taxi-ing gaily across the field and rising without a fault into the serene grey skies, Canning turned back with Trix and me and escorted us towards the gate. I made some remark upon the weather—unusually good for flying, considering the time of year.

He replied that this was his first winter in England for three years, and the weather seemed to him awful.

"Where have you been?" I asked, to make conversation, and his answer was:

"I've been on *safari*."

"On *safari*? That means big-game hunting in Africa, doesn't it?"

"Yes. I have been in an interesting part—what they call the Empire of the Snakes. Have you ever heard of it? The natives are immune to snake-bite. They handle cobras quite fearlessly."

"That must indeed have been an interesting country! Perhaps too interesting to stay in long," I laughed. "At any rate, you came back."

"Yes," he muttered frowningly, "I'm sorry to say I did. I was properly sold!—saw in the papers that my old great-aunt was dead, and as I am her sole heir, I just made a bee-line for my inheritance, only to find that late in life the old dear had amused herself speculating on the Stock Exchange and had left nothing but debts."

He made the statement quietly, but with a depth of resentment that was embarrassing. I murmured a few words of sympathy—there was no time for more, as we were outside the gates and Grindlay was holding the car door open for us.

As we drove away, Trix remarked that the man seemed to have stayed in the snake-country until he had almost turned into a snake himself.

"A bit massive in build for a snake—but I suppose you mean his eyes. I own that they struck me yesterday, before he mentioned the snake-country, as being very reptilian."

"Reptilian? Yes, that's the right word—cold-blooded. He makes me shudder, Onnie. I wouldn't like to have him for an enemy."

"Well," I said thoughtfully, "I don't think there is much doubt of his being Melisande's enemy. When he inquired of me if she was staying at Savileas, his tone did not suggest cordiality. I asked her after lunch if she knew him, saying he had been told she was staying with us. I wonder who told him? She is always very careful, but I am certain she does know him, and that she has the wind up. You noticed she would not come with us to-day, in spite of the fine chance it gave her to torment Martin."

"Oh? Was that her reason? I thought she was merely seizing a moment to be alone with Rudolf."

"Oh, rubbish! She can be alone with him as much as she likes. No, I have a theory about Canning. I have an idea that he belongs to a pre-Finnegan past of hers, and that his appearance is going to be a bit awkward for her, and perhaps convenient for us."

"A pre-Finnegan past? How long ago?"

"Bowness days. This man has been in Africa for more than three years. I believe that Algie did not come upon the scene until her father went to Darnley."

"Oh, Onnie—her childhood's friend?"

"Nonsense!—Or, if he were, they had not seen one another for many years when they renewed their acquaintance at Darnley. . . . I wonder if by any chance Canning was gambling on the lady having remained faithful to his memory, and meant, on his return to England, to dangle a fortune before her? Ah, how wonderful that would have been! Martin and Algie would both have been thrown over without a qualm—or with only the slight ripple of a divorce, if we are right about Algie being her husband—and she would have floated away to stay with Canning until she had spent all he had!"

"Far too good to be true," sighed Trix. "But

somehow I have an idea you may be right about Canning being pre-Algie in date."

"That endows our Melisande with two separate pasts. Martin can take his choice. . . . Oh, my dear girl, forgive me this spite! Melisande arouses all my worst passions."

Trix bit her lip, and there were tears in her eyes.

"I wonder how old that girl is," she mused.

"I don't think she can be more than three or four and twenty. She must have started young."

"She would have been much wiser not to come and stay with us. We are growing to know too much about her."

"I can't help thinking that she is only staying because Rudolf has got a hold on her. I am sure she is very uneasy."

"She can't help knowing that we none of us like her except poor old Auntie Bella. She is accustomed to have most of the women against her, but I think," said Trix wisely, "that this is her first experience of not being popular with the men. Ted and Ian hardly know she is there, and Martin loathes her——"

"Oh, you forget Noel——"

She laughed. "It's very good for him. He has never had any experience of the kind before. Good old Noel! Are you jealous, Onnie? He has always been your property."

This needed no answer. I just smiled. After a pause I went on: "I fancy she planned to have Algie near her all the time to advise and encourage. Ted's uncompromising refusal to receive him was a blow. Opened her eyes a bit. She had no idea what bad style he is, or that anybody could object to him. Then she was unlucky enough to allow him to catch her spooning with Ilianeff. That was most annoying, and I fancy they are not on good terms."

"——And Canning coming on the top of it all!

No ! The blackmailer's life is not always a happy one," said Trix hopefully. "Oh, if only these inquiry people have found her marriage lines, how happy we should all be ! "

From the bottom of my heart I echoed this aspiration as the Daimler drew up at home and we went indoors.

CHAPTER XV

MELISANDE'S PAST

WHEN we got back we found Bella a little exercised as to who should go that afternoon to a sherry-party at Broadlands, the home of our old friend Colonel Bird.

Bella wished to go herself and to display some of her charming house-party; but recruits were not numerous nor enthusiastic. Finally Ian volunteered, as did I; and, since Ian was of the number, Melian Argent had no objection to going too. Bella supposed four would be enough, the invitation being for Mrs. Owen and party.

Trix said that she might possibly come on later and bring Gracie Warren with her, but they two were very busy with their dresses for " The Wicked Uncle ", and it seemed difficult to find a moment for much else.

The Birds are nice folks—unassuming, but everywhere acceptable—and I was a little surprised and a good deal interested when, about half an hour after our arrival, Canning walked in with the air of being quite at home. Emmeline Bird brought him up to me to be introduced, and was pleased to find that we had met before.

" Lionel is mother's cousin," she told me, " and we are all so sorry for him. He is very clever and very adventurous, and has had a hard life, but when his aunt died—you've heard of her, Mrs. Zangula: old Miss Betts of Doncombe Hall—we all hoped and expected that he had come into money. No such luck! The naughty old lady got into the hands of a dishonest stockbroker, and she simply speculated until everything was gone. If she had lived much longer

I think she would have died in the workhouse infirmary! Wasn't it a come-down for him? When Doncombe was sold there were still debts! He never got a penny!"

This recital interested Bella very much. Old Miss Betts of Doncombe Hall had been an acquaintance all her life, and most people had shared in the surprise of her having left nothing. The nephew whom she had thus cheated was quite a hero in Bella's eyes, and of course she forthwith invited Canning to come over and see us, much to my amusement.

She confided to him that the whole family were, until Tuesday next, much absorbed in rehearsals, but, if he was flying Mrs. Warren over, could he not come to lunch the following day? He accepted readily, and sat down to talk to my sister and supply her with refreshments, while I went to chat with various acquaintances.

Later in the afternoon Ian Blackwood was introduced to Canning, and heard the story of old Miss Betts having gambled away the fortune that should have come to him. I saw them talking together with some interest, and presently Emmeline persuaded me to join the group and hear some of the traveller's adventures. He described to us part of the ceremony of his initiation into the snake tribe, and the application of the antidote to snake-bite which these remarkable people understand. Someone asked if he had brought back any snakes with him, and he shook his head emphatically, saying he had no love for the creatures. He had quite a little social success, everyone agreeing afterwards that it was very plucky of him to face his disappointment manfully and take up a job.

"But," said an elderly officer, "I have little doubt that the Government will soon be able to make use of him. He has special knowledge, and that is always of

value. He tells me he has already been approached by a publisher for a book on the Kingdom of the Snakes, but says he has no gift for writing."

"He's an excellent narrator," chimed in someone else, "and very modest, in view of what he has dared. I'm told his body is scarred all over with the cuts made by the natives in his inoculations."

There was now no doubt but that Melisande and he must meet, unless she packed up and fled; and that, in face of her commitments with Rudolf, would not be easy.

The whole party at dinner discussed Lionel Canning, and Bella related the history of his financial disappointment, while making the most of what she had heard concerning the likelihood of his obtaining some Government appointment.

Melisande listened to it all, and it was absorbing to watch her face. Evidently she was deciding on a plan of campaign, and she presently turned to Martin, whose place at dinner was always next hers, in compliance with Bella's old-fashioned idea that engaged couples should always be placed next each other:

"I am sure I do remember Mr. Canning," said she. "When Mrs. Zangula told me at lunch-time that he had been inquiring after me, I was not quite clear, but I am recalling now that he used to come for the fishing when I was staying at Bowness. It will be interesting to meet him after his long time abroad."

Evidently the acquaintance between herself and Canning had been too definite to be denied. Their reactions on encountering each other would be interesting, I thought. It almost seemed a pity that Ted had banished Finnegan, whose presence at the meeting might have been awkward for somebody!

The fliers had only got back just in time for dinner, and were bursting to tell their news to Trix and me. It was, however, not until a good deal later that, with

some diplomacy, I eventually managed to collect them, and we four assembled in my room, full of eagerness to hear how matters progressed.

Willis and Mills had, it appeared, been diligent, and had unearthed much material. The one thing we wanted, however—a marriage record—had been sought in vain.

It was quite true that "Millie Pumps", as she was known in Bowness, had been for a time barmaid at the "Lady of the Lake". Many remembered her, for her beauty had been a great draw, and the manager had not been pleased when she handed in her notice on the plea that she had to go home and keep house for her father. Willis and Mills had ascertained that this departure synchronized with her father's release from gaol, where he had served a sentence for misdemeanours on the turf.

He must have had money put away, or else his daughter had financed him; for, having changed his name, he set up as an inn-keeper at Darnley almost at once. It seemed probable that Millie had been glad of a chance to leave Bowness, where her career had been adventurous. Some said she had made the place too hot to hold her. The names of more than one man who had been conspicuously in her company were given. Canning was one. His father was a fox-hunting Squire in the neighbourhood. Some of the tales told of her were, as Ted remarked, "hot stuff".

Canning, it seemed certain, had gone abroad very soon after her departure. She left Westmorland in January, and he in March of the same year.

There was a curious fact. During the following summer Miss Pumps reappeared, and spent some time, not in Bowness, but in Ambleside, at a small tourist's hotel. She was accompanied by a girl friend. It seemed quite certain that Finnegan was not with them. After a stay of three weeks or so the

girls separated, the friend going south and Millie north, as far as could be ascertained. Somerset House, however, had been searched in vain for any likely sounding wedding on a near date. Mr. Willis, who was himself conducting the inquiry, had been much disappointed. He had felt sure that the three weeks' stay was for the purpose of qualifying by residence for marriage. Since it was more than two years previously, it was not possible to discover whither the girl had gone; but it was possible that Finnegan had been qualifying for residence elsewhere, and that the ceremony had taken place there, as soon as his bride joined him.

Inquiry at Darnley showed that Finnegan had begun to frequent the inn there as soon as Melisande appeared. He had fallen madly in love—in fact, the two were supposed to be engaged.

However, when Melisande got back from her summer holiday, the affair seemed to have cooled down. Then Martin Rhodes turned up, with two or three other young flying-officers, and there was much flirtation. Melisande was never barmaid at her father's hotel, but apparently held a kind of court among its *habitués*. Willis had asked Martin if he ever detected signs of jealousy on the part of Finnegan; to which he replied that nothing of the kind had been perceptible.

"I saw very little of the chap. He was not much about when I was there," he declared.

"Naturally enough," said Ted. "Melisande and he had decided that in order to raise the wind they must go through with this scheme of blackmail by way of breach of promise. I dare say, if he cares about the little slut, poor Finnegan suffered more than he had foreseen in the carrying out of their plans. I don't quite see, however, why he and Melisande kept so quiet about their marriage in the first place."

"Couldn't afford to announce it," I murmured.

"Both of them have expensive tastes, neither of them had a bean. No doubt old Pumps would have cut up very rough—might have turned Melisande out——"

"Quite," agreed Ted. "He had every intention of living happy ever after on his lovely daughter's husband. She is his chief asset. Fancy his feelings if he knew she had gone all sentimental and thrown away her chances."

"In my opinion, he couldn't regret it more sincerely than she does," was my comment. "She has cramped her style hopelessly, and would give anything to be free, if I am any judge. Oh, there must be a record of that marriage somewhere! There simply *must*!"

* * * * *

When, the following day just before lunch, some of us went down to the landing-field to welcome Gracie and Canning, our Melisande was of the party. I had not intended to go, but when I saw her drifting in that direction, I felt I could not miss my first impression of the meeting.

She was looking particularly lovely in her white furs, and she went straight up to Canning with outstretched hand and a pretty little phrase expressive of her pleasure in seeing him again.

The man's face was a curious study. The contempt that was at first visible very soon disappeared, to be merged in an amusement that made him look almost benevolent.

"Hallo, Miss—er—Lebreton," he said, as he took her hand.

There was an innuendo in his voice as he said her name, with an obvious hesitation, as though "Pumps" would have come easier. She detected it, quickly enough, and for the first time in our acquaintance I saw her look embarrassed.

Then she raised her eyes to his—those astonishing

eyes !—and I could see his expression change : melt. Their gaze seemed interlocked. It was as if he could not look away. It was ridiculously easy for her to call him back to his allegiance. I felt inclined to murmur, " And Beauty draws me with a single hair ! " One knew that, whatever she had done, this man would condone it if he believed she still cared for him. It really seemed a pity that for her blackmailing adventure she should have selected a victim who had succeeded in cutting himself completely free of her. Neither Finnegan nor this returned wanderer would ever be free ! *La Belle Dame sans merci* had them both securely in thrall.

As we returned to the house, Canning had eyes for no one else. They walked apart, they conversed in an undertone. Her face showed light and shade—interest—charm—even at last something that he doubtless mistook for tenderness.

As we entered the hall, Ilianeff walked forward.

" Why, there you are, Melisande ! " he cried in surprise and some resentment. " I've been searching everywhere for you ! "

I saw the bright glitter of hate in Canning's ophidian eyes, but Gracie, who was just behind, dashed into the breach. " Hallo, wizard ! " cried she. " How goes it ? All present and correct ? "

Ilianeff smiled as he greeted her. " Quite ! Now that you have arrived," he replied sportively—our Rudolf was not often sportive ! " But my leading lady has given me the slip, which means that she will have to do penance after lunch by putting in a bit of extra time ! "

" Why, of course I will, Rudolf," said Melisande, in her most dulcet tones, going up to him and glancing at a card that he held. " What have you there ? Something new ? "

He moved close to her side, displaying the device

on the card, which she seemed to understand. She stood absorbed, while he said something of which I could not quite snatch the purport, but which seemed to be an explanation which she understood.

Canning turned his face to me. It looked quite Satanic. "What does he mean by calling Miss Lebreton his leading lady?" he snapped.

"Oh," was my answer, "Miss Lebreton is a wonderful medium; and this man is—well, he's really more than a spiritualist. Under his influence she does most surprising things."

"Does she, by Jove?" he murmured. Then, looking at me, "Is he a charlatan?"

"Oh no. Something much more formidable," I replied with relish. "He's an adept in the Tibetan branch of esoteric Buddhism."

"Indeed!" There was a cold rage in the low voice that alarmed me. It seemed evident that, in those few minutes which it took to walk from the landing-field up to the house, he had fallen under the spell as completely as ever. "Why," he went on, speaking so that I alone could hear, "it's enough to tempt one to confront Tibetan magic with African! I think I know which would be the stronger."

Melisande went upstairs to lay down her furs, and Rudolf went up with her, talking earnestly. Canning had to turn to Bella and make her his compliments. He was fully master of himself, but I saw the merciless eyes flickering over the girl's lovely form as she moved upward: and suddenly I felt afraid.

We went in to lunch with our usual informality. Rudolf and Melisande entered the room together after we were all seated. Canning was next to his hostess, and the place on his other side was vacant. I saw that Melisande meant to take it. She caught his eye and made a move. Rudolf took her hand, quite calmly and deliberately, and led her to a place

at some distance, next to himself. She sat down as he indicated, but not willingly.

It was evident—at least to me—that Canning was conscious that Rudolf had established a real ascendancy; also that the knowledge moved him to fury. He began to make inquiries as to our programme on the night of the entertainment. Everyone was ready to give him information, and he soon learnt that Melisande and Rudolf were the star turn. He looked at Martin, who most evidently had no objections at all. I have a feeling that to Canning himself the fact of his own violent displeasure was a surprise—something inexplicable, but too strong to be disregarded. All lunch I sensed—and I afterwards found that Ted too had been partly conscious of it—the antagonism rapidly mounting between Canning and Ilianeff.

Melisande bore it with equanimity. She was used to having men competing for her favours. It was not serious to her—merely tiresome. She wanted to talk to Canning; and Ilianeff was not going to allow it. For the present she remained passive. She was torn with no doubts. Canning and Rudolf both admired her, but neither of them was rich, so there was nothing doing. They must just carry on. I thought she ought to have known, having had previous experience with him, that Canning was not a safe person to play about with. What had passed between them in their former acquaintance? One could not say. She did not seem nervous or apprehensive, but it must be confessed that I was both. I knew well that with these two men in conflict there was bound to be a clash of some kind.

CHAPTER XVI

TREADING ON EGGS

AFTER lunch I had to go and do some telephoning, which took me longer than I had intended.

When I rejoined the party in the library, where Bella was sitting, it was a bit of a surprise to me to find Canning and Rudolf in lively conversation. Rudolf was talking of his experiences in a Tibetan *gompa*, and Canning of his own in the country of the Snake-people.

Evidently both men were really interested, and Bella was eager to know whether Canning also could not contribute to her programme.

He said "No" to that, very decidedly. Demonstrations with snakes would be too dangerous, even had he had any snakes with him, which he had not. Neither had he any natives, whose imperviousness to bites he might have displayed. He curdled the blood of his listeners by telling of the man who acted as his proxy at his own initiation. This man, quite naked, had been laid upon terribly sharp thorns and weights had been piled on his body; also a man had stood upon him. When they took him up from the ground afterwards, though there were deep dents on his body where the thorns had pressed him, there was not a single puncture in the skin, so wonderfully is the job of hardening the epidermis against snake-bite performed.

Bella, with a sigh of reluctance, relinquished her dazzling hope of seeing cobras charmed, but, with her usual dogged persistence, proceeded to suggest a lantern lecture. Canning firmly refused that like-

wise. He said he had no skill as a narrator, and when it had been suggested to him that he might earn some money in that way, he had declined. Yes, he had many photographs of his own taking; but none had been made into lantern-slides. He hated the bare idea of lecturing.

He agreed with Rudolf that the Asiatics have a far greater knowledge of their subjective selves than the materialistic Europeans; he asserted that this quality was possessed also by the Africans, though in a less developed form, seeing that they are a primitive people, centuries behind the Asiatics in their intellectual development.

"Though, mind you," he said, "the mere fact of their rather childlike mentality is a help in a way. They are almost entirely without self-consciousness, and their inner perceptions are wonderfully keen. The unseen is to most of them as real as the seen."

He spoke of the native idea of its being necessary to seclude a great or exceptionally good person, in case his thought should become contaminated by the evil in others. As an example he related how the chief of the Snake-people did not live in his capital, but in a private settlement some miles distant, surrounded only by members of his own family, lest the evil thoughts of others might interfere with his mind or poison his will.

"That's a great truth—surprisingly disregarded by us westerners as a rule," remarked Blackwood. "The moral poison of low surroundings."

"It is the root idea of all the solitaries, hermits, ascetics, monks of every kind," put in Melian. "They all acknowledge the existence of evil and its deadly power. We simply pretend that it doesn't exist."

"But what," I suggested, "of the evil that is not embodied? The spiritual wickedness in high places

that we have to contend with? If all we had to fear was bad company, it would be comparatively easy to keep ourselves uncontaminated. But the recluse who lives alone upon a height is just as liable to temptation, because the evil is in himself."

"Quite," said Blackwood. "There was awful truth in the temptation of good St. Anthony——"

"Yes, if he had had to live, say, in Whitechapel, instead of the desert, he might have become so absorbed in helping his unfortunate fellow-creatures that he would not have needed to go and roll in the thorns," suggested Ted.

Blackwood and Canning both chimed in, and argued the case for and against the hermit life quite ably. Rudolf was much interested, but it was comic to watch the face of Melisande. They might have been talking Sanscrit as far as she was concerned. Bella also soon became bored, and Canning was quick to see it. He turned suddenly to Miss Lebreton, interrupting her in a delicate yawn, and said gaily:

"Like to come up for a half-hour's flight? Mrs. Warren won't be leaving yet awhile, I expect, and she doesn't mind my using the 'bus."

Melisande fervently declined. She said she hated flying, but would take Canning round the garden before the daylight went if he liked. Just then a message came down from Gracie to say that she couldn't fly home, because she found she could not leave before dark, so Canning must fly the 'bus back to the 'Drome, and Ted would run her home in his car later. Canning, upon this, rose leisurely. He had no objections to flying after dark, and accepted Melisande's offer of a stroll in the grounds before departing. They went off, accordingly, to Rudolf's evident annoyance. Bella called after them to ask him to come back to tea, but he regretfully declined, saying his time was not his own, and he didn't wish

to get rapped over the knuckles by his employer for outstaying his leave.

When they had disappeared, Melian went up to Rudolf and, ignoring his thunder-cloud brow, asked him gently to come and look at some diagram she had just executed to his order. As I had before noticed, her voice and manner seemed to soothe him. He got up and followed her out of the room.

And what of Melisande's afternoon? . . . Here I am face to face with the great disadvantage of a story written by an eye-witness. There was no eye-witness to what passed between that remarkable young woman and her discarded lover. I can fill in from my own knowledge of her and of him, but it must be all surmise.

I guess, then, that she had told him how Finnegan swept her off her feet with his violent wooing—how after a time she had cause to suspect his fidelity, or at least his stability. She found that he was not steady, and I am fairly certain that she said she had broken her engagement and turned to Martin, who, she felt, was safe, even if not too exciting. It is likely that she hinted what good friends she and Lionel could be when she was married and safe from her father's unkindness, her own impecuniosity, and Finnegan's importunities.

Canning knew, as no one else did, with what difficulties she had had to contend. She had had a hard life, and was in sight of a safe haven.

So it may have run. She could make out a most pathetic case for herself, and so it is to be supposed she did; for it is certain that the result was a triumph for her. Perhaps her lover felt that he had been guilty of contributory negligence. He should have known better than to expect fidelity from such a girl for three years!

Anyway, she did succeed in making her case good;

for now, by a curious chance, I am able to tell you some of the sequel from a personal source.

A letter, written by Algie Finnegan, and addressed to Martin Rhodes, was discovered by the police, in circumstances which I shall proceed to relate in their due order. He had apparently decided not to go on with the present state of things, and had written a letter, to hold over Melisande's head if she went too far; but his letter did not reach its addressee until too late to be of any help.

I was, however, able to avail myself of the information it contained about this very afternoon in Melisande's life, so I know that Canning and she walked together, taking all the time they wanted, right down to the flying-field where the *Libellule* lay awaiting her pilot. It was dusk, but Melisande's white furs were plainly visible to Finnegan, who had been prowling about for some time in hopes of seeing her and, finding that the *Libellule* was still waiting, meant to ask a lift from Canning back to the 'Drome.

When he saw them together, fury seethed in him, and he stepped behind a dense growth of yew hedge which bordered the narrow path leading to the field.

The pair stopped, right in front of his hiding-place, and he heard Canning say, "Lilith is what your name should be—you could charm the birds off the boughs! You are fifty per cent. lovelier and fifty per cent. more desirable than you were three years ago; but there's still one point on which you must satisfy me. What about this mountebank—this Jugo-Slav, or whatever he is? He's head over ears in love with you. What are you going to do about him?"

Melisande raised her great eyes reproachfully. "Oh, Lionel, for shame! The Professor is engaged to be married to Miss Argent!"

Finnegan declares that at that artless speech he almost hooted out loud with laughter and gave himself away. He could see in Canning's face all his distrust, all his overmastering longing to believe in her. He must have guessed that she was playing false all round. Even Finnegan had no idea whether she was simply making use of Canning, or whether she really liked him. He said that all her mind was bent on making slam out of a hazardous hand. She just looked up beseechingly at Canning, and he caught her in his arms, kissing her in a way that caused the eavesdropper to clench his hands in impotent rage. However, he contained himself until the lover had torn himself away, jumped into his machine, and, after the necessary preliminaries, taken off and soared into the air. Quivering with the effort she had made and the risks she had run, Melisande turned to go up to the house, and found herself confronted with the blazing wrath of Algie.

He had suffered horribly of late, and for the moment he was past caution, and threatened to go straight up to the Manor and tell them all what would put an end for ever to all hope of anything between herself and Rhodes.

It seems that at first she was really frightened. To put herself right with Lionel had been difficult going, and from that ordeal she was emerging triumphant when she found herself faced suddenly with this new terrible complication.

But she was equal to the occasion! In a kind of way the fact that Finnegan knew her to be an unscrupulous liar was a help to her. She asked him if he was mad. He had a very good idea of what her former relations with Canning had been, and he could see that she was, as she confessed, faced with a fearful dilemma. Could he not see that she had taken literally the only way out by making friends

with the man who had it in his power to destroy them both?

Surely he must see that very soon now—in a few days more—it would all be over? Martin's patience was stretched to its ultimate limit. She had worn him down to the breaking-point. He would say the word and, the moment he did, she must leave Savileas and go home to institute proceedings.

Having over-topped such difficulties and come so far on their road, were they to throw in their hands now, just because of the appearance of Canning, here to-day, gone to-morrow, a man who could never be constant?

She succeeded in convincing him, after much altercation. He could see for himself that somehow Canning must be kept quiet until Melisande left Savileas. During her talk she had given her old lover no hint at all of the uncertainty of her present engagement—he was under the impression that she meant to marry Martin—he was therefore not at all inclined to think that she would be leaving in a few days. That was clever; Algie owned it; and she then turned on him all her battery of charms and clinging lips, to which the poor fellow, starved for a long time, quickly succumbed, and allowed her to depart at last, having spent far too much time in the dark and wintry park.

Meanwhile, we in the house became a trifle worried when night fell and she had not returned. Bella at last expressed her anxiety, and urged Martin, when he came out from his rehearsal, to go and look for her.

Martin accordingly took a torch and went round to the side of the house, where the take-off of the path that led to the landing-field began.

He could not see her, and though he called several times, she did not reply. He came back rather

annoyed, having been all the way to the field and finding that the 'plane had gone.

When he got indoors he learned that the missing fair one had just returned, very apologetic, with a story of having missed her way in the dark, and found herself at a stile that took her out into the main road, quite a long way down the park. She knew she was safe then, as she had only to follow the road to the drive gate, which she had done. She was most apologetic for having been the cause of Martin's fruitless quest.

Never a word of Finnegan !

But, poor girl, she did have what Ted called "putrid luck"; for Casson later that evening confided to his master that they had heard Tartar barking and, going out with torches, had come upon Finnegan letting himself out of the grounds by a small wicket-gate. He told them he had been sent over with a message from the 'Drome for Canning, had missed him by a few minutes, and was angry at having had his journey for nothing. When the man asked him why he had not gone to the stable entrance, he replied that they kept a dangerous dog, and he did not want to start a row which might entail his having to summon Mr. Owen.

Melisande was naturally not publicly challenged as to whether or no she had seen Finnegan. Nobody cared whether she had or not; but Ted knew, and I knew, and Martin knew, that she must have met him in the grounds and spent the best part of an hour in his company.

That night at dinner she glowed and sparkled in a way that struck us all as being exceptional. It was weeks later that I knew why. At the time it seemed most surprising. In fact she was exulting and triumphant at the success of her own diplomacy. She had cleverly tackled both of the men who might

ruin her, and she realized the extent of her power with both. She had deftly extricated herself from an awkward jam. The news of Canning's arrival had no doubt presaged disaster to her; and she had grasped the nettle and turned it into a rose! She had enlisted the discarded, embittered lover in her service; and she had proceeded indomitably to confront and to defeat Finnegan, who with his own eyes had seen her being made love to first by Ilianeff and then by Canning! She might indeed congratulate herself!

All that evening I was obsessed by the thought of her and reflections upon the ease with which bad women can twist men round their fingers. I thought of Finnegan too—I was inclined to feel sorry for him; and then suddenly, just as my mind was lazily dwelling on the fact of his being Irish, the thought—the great thought—leaped into my mind!

We had just finished a rubber, and I had retired to take up my embroidery. Ted, having lowered himself into a low chair at my side, was smoking meditatively.

"Ted—oh, Ted! Something has just occurred to me! Why didn't I think of that before? It's a chance—somehow I think it's more than a chance——"

"Why—what?" He sat up eagerly, and I leaned towards him so that my words were audible to him alone.

"About Finnegan," I murmured. "He's Irish—he's a Roman Catholic—of course, isn't it obvious to you now?—*they were married in Ireland!*"

"By Jove!"

"Find out what part of Ireland he comes from, and we'll have solved the mystery!"

DURING lunch that day Bella had talked mostly to Lionel Canning, being sure he would like to know how old a friend of hers his defaulting aunt had been; also devoured with curiosity to learn exactly what his prospects were.

He was not expansive, upon that or any other subject, but she was able to elicit that for the present he was fixed at Baxted. The manager of the 'Drome, Todd by name, was giving him advantageous terms, and he liked the work—all of it, that is, except the job of taking lady pupils for trial flights!

"I don't include Mrs. Warren," he added, with a bow to Gracie, "because she and I get on excellently. She isn't afraid to confess that she funks a thing, and is, in fact, a brave lady."

He said this in a tone that carried conviction and good old Gracie blushed at such praise from a man with such a reputation.

In reply to further questioning, Canning went on to say that his cousin, Colonel Bird, had lent him a very small house, or rather bungalow, on his land. It was unlet at the time, and the Colonel would take no rent for it. Canning wanted to give a housewarming, and wondered if he might venture to invite our four men.

"It has to be a stag-party," said he: "I haven't accommodation for ladies; but Todd has promised to come, also Colonel Bird, and perhaps Mr. Warren would likewise honour me?"

The men had been keeping themselves as free from engagements as they could, because of the demands

of the forthcoming entertainment. They all promised to go to his sherry-party on the afternoon named and, in his reticent fashion, Canning seemed gratified.

Thus we women were left to ourselves on the date named, and all the men went off, squeezing into the big Daimler.

The inducement as far as the three fliers were concerned was that Canning had been evolving plans which Todd thought admirable for air campaigns in the event of war. All that could possibly be done to bring them to the notice of the Government was to be attempted. Naturally the chance of showing the scheme to Squadron-Leader Blackwood was an opportunity not to be missed.

On arrival at "The Digs" (as some late tenant of the bungalow had named it), they found that Finnegan was of the party. Ted told me afterwards that the young man was very much on his best behaviour. Todd, the manager, mentioned him to Ted, describing him as " clever as sin, and a wonderful hand with a refractory engine ".

" He's a lazy, dissipated young chap," he confided, " but a great favourite with the lady pupils. They flock here to be taught to fly by a chap with such eyelashes! I've more than doubled that branch of our work since he came; but he needs watching."

Mr. Todd was inclined to be expansive and complacent altogether, for he looked upon Canning as a most valuable addition to his staff, though he declared that he knew he would not long be able to keep him: " Thoroughly able chap—you know where you are with him; doesn't have too much to say, either; ' keeps himself *to* himself ', as our old village ladies have it."

The fact that there were several others present at the Bungalow prevented the coolness between Finne-

gan and the Savileas men from being obvious. Moreover, Ilianeff had no particular grudge against him, having seen very little of him. Algie rather forced himself upon the wizard's notice, as Ted observed, and seemed anxious to ingratiate himself. As Canning also apparently wished to cultivate Rudolf, he had quite a little success, which he accepted as one to whom limelight is no new thing.

Though as a rule abstemious, as became a devotee of his cult, Rudolf, it seemed, had a weakness for liqueurs; and Canning had brought back with him from Africa a wonderful drink, which he called Makalia. It was a restorative, he said, highly valued by the natives, but made only in very small quantities, and as expensive as it was rare.

Canning had not paid for what he brought home, it was a parting gift from the old chief who had initiated him into the brotherhood of the Snake Tribe. Makalia acted as a powerful heart stimulant, and was administered in cases of snake-bite.

Rudolf had been, as a fact, fasting pretty rigorously of late, since he had found his passion for Melisande was interfering with his powers of concentration. He felt immensely invigorated by the Makalia, which Canning assured him was perfectly harmless and altogether beneficial. He promised to bring a small flask of it to the Coronation Hall on the night of the show, in case the *gomchen* felt the need of a stimulant before or after his experiments.

Ted said that it really was extraordinary stuff, though too sweet for him personally—" not a patch on Chartreuse ! "

These details were confided to Trix and me by Ted on their return from the stag-party, and they interested me profoundly; but I asked Ted whether it did not strike him as odd that Canning should be

going out of his way to make friends with Ilianeff. Ted could not see it.

"Canning's not in the same street with either of those other chaps, Algie or Rudolf," he said. "If he wanted Melisande, he would just take her; but, unluckily for us, I'm afraid he doesn't. A bit disillusioned, I gather."

Martin had no opinion on the matter. Since he rang up Mr. Willis and offered him my suggestion that Melisande's marriage had taken place in Ireland, he could think of nothing else; unless perhaps of the little play in which Trix and he were taking part, and in which they were acquitting themselves almost too well.

Later, when Bella and the others came downstairs, Bella was very curious to hear a detailed account of Canning's party, but Melisande was the only other one who seemed much interested. Rudolf informed her that her friend young Finnegan had been there, and that he had asked several very intelligent questions as to the methods and practice of esoteric Buddhism. Evidently this was most surprising to Melisande; and when Lionel Canning's charming hospitality and wonderful Makalia were added to the recital, it can hardly be wondered at if she was considerably elated. She, Melisande, was the prize for which all these young men were competing! There was but one fly in the ointment. Martin remained the only suitor who was financially in the running. It really was hard luck; but there was no help for it. Her present engagement must continue a little longer.

The next night we all separated earlier than usual, in view of the fact that the morrow was the great day.

I had been more than usually busy and occupied in such varying ways that it was difficult to keep my

head; and this is the only explanation I can offer for the fact that I did a thing I almost never do—left my aspirins in the bathroom!

The nearest bathroom to my suite is close to my door, but I do have to go out into the corridor to reach it. It was nearly two o'clock when I snapped on the lights, and all was very quiet in the sleeping house. Slipping into the slightly open doorway, I swiftly retrieved the missing bottle from the glass shelf and came out again. As I softly closed the bathroom door behind me, I saw Rudolf at the far end of the corridor, coming towards me.

He took no notice of me, and as he drew near I became aware that this was his astral body, or whatever word conveys to the uninitiated mind the fact that his physical body was asleep in bed.

It seemed that he was not conscious of my presence, and I stayed just where I was. The fact that the lights were burning had not apparently attracted his notice. I watched him as he slowly advanced, wondering what his goal might be. Suddenly the faint sound of a door-handle being turned reached me, and it seemed that he also must have been conscious of that—at all events, he ceased to advance and stood still, as if hesitating, just short of a point at which the corridor widened and there was a door at right angles, leading into Trix's own sitting-room.

Trix herself came softly out into the passage, and she was followed by Martin Rhodes. She was evidently surprised to find the place illuminated, and her glance travelled instantly to where I was standing.

The door by which they had emerged being at right angles to the passage wall and facing me, Rudolf was behind them, and they did not see him. The sight of me at once supplied a reason for the lights; otherwise they might have turned round to

look. I wondered whether they would have seen him! As it was, they smiled at me and crept along until close enough to whisper.

"One final rehearsal!" murmured Trix, who seemed quite unembarrassed. Martin, who, after all, knew me but slightly, seemed uncomfortable.

"Ought I not to keep her up so late?" he murmured apologetically.

"She wouldn't have stayed if she didn't want to," was my answer, "but you had better both be off now, or you'll be so stale to-morrow."

As we conferred, Rudolf had once more moved forward. He actually passed the place where we stood, going on along the corridor, and almost brushing against Trix, who gave a great start.

"Oh!"—she gripped my arm—"what was that? A cold wind!—there must be a door or a window open."

"Never mind; Martin can go along and see. You run to bed," was my advice.

She kissed me, waved her hand at Martin, and fled noiselessly back to her room.

Martin looked at me, frowning. "What was that? Jolly queer. Something passed us," he muttered—"some shadow. What could it have been?"

He flashed an uneasy glance around. "I had an impression of Ilianeff . . . a sort of whiff. . . . But why should it make me think of him? Like sandalwood or something oriental."

"That's interesting," I whispered. "You saw nothing?"

"I thought I saw a shadow——"

"Quite uncanny! But remember it's nearly two in the morning and we are half asleep."

He did not look it. His eyes were shining and he had more colour than usual. Very much alive and

conscious he was. I turned slowly, sending a look in the direction whither the *gomchen* had gone. He had quite disappeared.

" I'll go along and find out if there's a draught to account for it——"

So saying, Martin moved in the same direction past my door to where the passage turned abruptly to the right, at the house wall. Here there was a large casement window, looking out over the garden. I saw him push it wider and lean forth into the night. Something outside seemed to interest him, for he remained there staring. I took the chance to go back to my room, shut myself in, and take a couple of aspirins.

Hardly were they swallowed when a tap, low but urgent, sounded on my door. Hastily I tip-toed across the floor and peeped forth. Martin stood outside, evidently full of news.

" Let me in, please. There's something I must tell you ! "

In he whisked and closed the door behind him.

" Onnie, there's a ladder up against the house—a ladder at one of the windows. The moon's down, and it's getting so dark that I couldn't be sure at first, but come and look, won't you ? I'm pretty certain we're being burgled."

" Which window ? "

He shook his head. He had no idea.

" Along to the right—you'll know—come on, please ! "

We made no noise as we crept forth. Holding my dressing-gown close about my throat, I peered into the winter night. The waxing moon had already set. It was not easy to see, and it was fast growing still darker, but I was positive that Martin was right. There was a ladder, and it was at Melisande's window. Light from within the room shone upon the top

rung. Apparently her husband had come to pay her a visit!

Whisking quickly about, I gripped Martin's arm and drew him away from the window, tip-toeing so that I could get quite near his ear.

In the lowest of whispers I confided my suspicions. "If you can catch him, your difficulties are at an end," I assured him.

"You're sure it's her room?"

"Perfectly. He can't have been there long. I shouldn't think he would be leaving for an hour at least. But we must make sure."

"I think you're wrong, Onnie. It isn't Finnegan. It can't be. . . . What about Tartar?"

That brought me up short. Tartar ought to be loose—Tartar *was* loose somewhere in the grounds. It was a little bewildering.

"I don't know, but let us come and rouse Ted at once——"

"You wait here, Onnie; the cold's brutal. I'll go and fetch Ted to you."

I nodded without speaking, and went back to my room, while he hastened away. I felt that I ought to take my stand at the window and watch, but I was not feeling any too well . . . and as I hesitated on the threshold, I saw Rudolf again. Quite plainly. He came along, returning by the way he had gone. It was as if he had gone to Melisande's room and was coming back. I held my breath. He still looked quite impersonal and trance-like, and I stood there and watched while he passed me and went on. At the door of his own room he disappeared, giving the impression of melting through the shut panels.

Hardly had I lost sight of him when the two, Ted and Martin, came hastening along towards me, Ted having scrambled into his clothes. Still dominated

by the need not to disturb anyone, we all three went within my room to discuss.

The idea that the intruder was a burglar could hardly be entertained, because, if it were so, Melisande would have shrieked or rung her bell for Teresa; unless she were soundly asleep, which was not very likely in view of the fact that there was a light in her room.

"But, as Martin points out, if it is Finnegan, what about Tartar? I feel sure that Grindlay would be most particular to have him on the spot, especially since they caught Finnegan trespassing the other evening."

"The thing we must do is to make sure," pronounced Ted, "but I do wish the minx had fixed her assignation a couple of nights later. If we catch her to-night, we must clear her out at once, and that means that poor old Noel's entertainment will go west."

"On the other hand, Martin will have seized this wonderful opportunity to cut the knot——"

They urged that there was no time to be lost. In any case they must be sure what was happening. There was just the chance that it might be a burglar—anyway, both Martin and I had seen the ladder. . . .

"I haven't," said Ted, and opening the door slipped out by himself and hastened to the landing-window.

He came back in a minute or two with a blank face.

"You two not having me on, by any chance, are you?"

Indignant denials, coupled with urgent injunctions to tell us what he saw.

"I'm ready to take my Bible oath there's no ladder along the terrace anywhere," was his brief statement.

We both whisked out and looked for ourselves. It was very dark but we were soon satisfied that in

those few minutes the ladder had been removed and the light extinguished. We stared long enough to feel quite certain, and then the two men at once went off downstairs and out upon the terrace with flash-lights.

I returned to my room, which did not look out that way, longing for bed with a terrible yearning, but condemned to remain awake until they returned, which they did not do for at least half an hour.

There was a concrete terrace below the windows, so that no traces of footsteps would be visible. Just facing Melisande's window was a flight of three steps leading down to the garden. In the hard frost, these were as dry as bone.

They could find no trace of anyone having been there. They had gone round hunting for Tartar, but not liking to call him, in case of disturbing people. They found him at last, shut into a summer-house. He was licking his lips, having evidently just consumed an appetizing meal.

It was all very puzzling. I could not help wondering whether Rudolf's errand had been to warn the pair that we were awake and about. That seemed too fantastic; yet I had actually seen him go along the passage to the room in question and return thence after a very few minutes. I did not mention my sight of him to either of the disgruntled pair of sleuths; but I did wonder what had happened in Melisande's room.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DEBACLE

IN spite of mental perturbation, I was so tired after our adventure that the aspirins had their way with me, and I slept heavily until after six. When I awoke the situation seemed even more puzzling than it had done in the small hours.

Before going finally to bed, I had crept softly along the passage and stood for several long moments outside Melisande's door listening for any sound from within, however faint. There was none. Martin had confirmed my own observation—he was sure that when he first looked out the room was lit from within. Now all was dark. Had Finnegan looked forth and seen lights along the upstairs corridor? or was it possible that Rudolf had actually succeeded in conveying a warning?

That he could have done anything of the kind seemed at first too wild even for suspicion; and yet the subconscious self, as I well know, does play curious tricks.

Ilianeff was in close rapport with the mind (or what passed for a mind) of Melisande. His own spirit was in a state of amazing sensitiveness. It seemed just barely possible that a sense of her danger had been communicated to him, and that he had, without his own conscious volition, been able to warn her.

What had he done? Just walked into her room? Then, had he been visible to her? Through what sense had she perceived him? Sight? Sound? Touch?

She was under his sway. Somehow he had con-

veyed a message—a message which was definite enough for her to send her other visitor packing !

It might safely be presumed that she had not wished Finnegan to visit her. I knew this by her nervousness at night, as described by Teresa. When she saw and heard him she must have been half wild with fear and apprehension. She must also have been quite at a loss as to how to persuade him to leave her. She dare not, as he well knew, make any noise, take any steps, such as leaving her room, or ringing her bell. Secrecy was as vital to her as to him.

Then, how had she persuaded him to accept Ilianeff's message ? That Algie had himself seen the apparition was most improbable ; but *at the same time it was not impossible.*

If he *had* seen it, he would have instantly assumed that it was the man himself ; and when Rudolf, having as it were made himself known, turned at once and went out, Algie must have assumed that he was going to rouse the house.

He would not stop, at that hour and in those circumstances, to consider how unlikely it was that his rival should give the alarm. I guessed that he had in all probability gone after him to the door, opened it, seen that the lights in the corridor were blazing and, without further reflection, made good his escape.

Thanks to his youth and agility, he had actually carried off the ladder, which was found in its usual place next morning, remarkably free of finger-prints, for which Ted, in an access of sleuthing zeal, made some kind of search.

Anyone who has ever tried carrying a twelve-foot ladder single-handed knows what a difficult job it is. Nevertheless, Algie had done it and left almost no traces behind him.

After consultation, Ted, Martin, and I made up our minds to say nothing at present to anybody, not

even Trix, concerning what had happened. Nobody had been awakened, and we were determined not to do anything that might endanger our success at the Coronation Hall that evening.

Very few of us appeared to breakfast that morning. Not Melisande, who had been specially enjoined to rest all day—not Trix, who also would have much on her shoulders that night.

I felt myself bound to put in an appearance and trust to obtaining a free hour that afternoon for a siesta. Ilianeff came down very late, looking black under the eyes, and ate nothing, drinking strong coffee in a glum silence.

I heard later that several notes passed between him and Melisande in course of the day, but that did not seem remarkable, in view of the demands of the programme.

For a wonder, I did get my afternoon's nap, after all, by dint of representing to Bella that, unless she was merciful, I did not think I could go through with things; a state of health which I attributed to a disturbed night. She took fright at the hint that I might crock up, for she was helpless without me, poor dear.

Everyone seemed to disappear during the afternoon. Dixon, without prompting, brought up my tea to my own sitting-room; and when it was time to dress I was feeling much better, though my mind was still in a bit of a ferment.

Trix, Ted, and Martin dressed for their parts in the play before starting for the hall, and did not appear in public until they were seen on the stage.

Melisande also was to remain behind the scenes until the time for her performance. She wore a frock of silvery tissue over oyster satin, with long floating sleeves. In her hair was a slender crystal tiara, of sparkling stars. She looked so beautiful as to be

quite startling, though I could see that she was by no means easy in her mind. Her courage and poise were admirable. Ilianeff quite lost himself, gazing upon her in a kind of rapt adoration which Melian Argent for some reason seemed to find amusing. Never once since the first appearance of Miss Lebreton on the scene had I seen the slightest small flicker of jealousy on the part of Rudolf's fiancée. She was certainly a remarkable young woman.

Dinner would have been an uneasy kind of meal had it not been for Ted. He seemed as fresh as paint, and as he was made up to look like a surly old codger with grey whiskers, he thought fit to play the part as we ate, sending Bella and the staff who waited on us into fits of laughter with his rasping, snappish repartees and his husky throat.

As prompter and general factotum, I provided myself with one of Dixon's big white overalls to put on over my evening gown.

By special request from the Squadron-Leader, Bella wore her red velvet and garnets, in which she undoubtedly looked her best.

The night was very cold. The sickle moon was still above the horizon as we drove to Baxted, but rapidly sinking. The sky was beginning to be covered with a stealthy veil of grey cloud, as though the frost might give towards morning, so it would be very dark presently.

Grindlay had provided plenty of foot-warmers and fur rugs, so we did not suffer from cold on the journey. Bella, Ian Blackwood, Melisande, and Melian went together, and I with Martin, Ted, and Trix, who all seemed to think the sky would fall if I were not at their elbow when we reached the Hall.

One of our doubts was speedily set at rest upon arrival, since a great board announcing "STANDING-ROOM ONLY" was already displayed in the porch.

That sent us behind the scenes in excellent spirits. I went round to the front for a few minutes to see that Bella's seat had been duly kept for her and so on, and was at once greeted by a contingent of Birds, the Colonel having taken a whole row of places, and being surrounded by a big party, among whom was Lionel Canning, who sat at the end of the row.

He smiled at me with less reserve than I had hitherto seen in him. "How's the wizard?" he asked mischievously. "Tell him I'll be round and give him a thimbleful of Makalia before his stunt begins."

I sent my glance sweeping round the room to try to find Finnegan, but could not see him. However, I made sure he would be there, to make the tale of our beauty's victims complete.

It had been arranged, after a good deal of discussion, to have the play at the beginning of the evening, lest the atmosphere of the occult should spoil the public appetite for simplicity.

Accordingly, after a preliminary display by Noel's very creditable orchestra of lads, I took my place in the prompt box and "THE WICKED UNCLE" was given.

It went without a hitch, and I only wished I had been able to enjoy it from the front. Laughter was almost continuous, which encouragement caused the actors to play with tremendous gusto, and when the curtain fell applause was almost frantic. The delighted audience were keyed up for anything.

A couple of glees by the Club lads filled in time while the stage was prepared for Ilianeff. Noel went before the curtain and explained how eminent he was, and how much honoured they all should feel that so great a man deigned to reveal to them some of his secret magic.

I remained behind the scenes during this, in order to see that Melisande was perfect from head to heel

and that all the required "properties" were duly assembled.

Canning, it appeared, had offered his services to Rudolf as an assistant, since Ted, who at first had been scheduled to do this, had to remove his make-up and costume and could not be ready in time.

My mind was not altogether at ease, for a reason I must try to make clear. Sidney had always taught me that the gifts acquired by the hard road of mystic discipline *must never be exercised unworthily*. I well knew that he would not approve this exhibition on a public stage. Enough was now known to me of Rudolf's powers for me to be sure they were genuine. Was it safe to exploit them in order to dazzle a provincial assembly of ignorant persons?

My own relief when this part of the programme was over would be profound.

The display began by a darkening of the stage and an assertion from Rudolf that he would make the assembled audience see what he chose them to see. He described the Dakini—a feminine spirit of some kind, whom he would summon to appear upon the stage, wearing a purple cloak "lined with sunshine" and a garland of flowers. She would have floating hair, and he would allow two people to come upon the stage, so as to discover for themselves that she was not substantial and could not be felt or handled.

In a breathless hush, and to the subdued strains of Melian's violin, the people stared at the black velvet background upon which there appeared by slow degrees a luminous vapour which gradually assumed more and more distinctness, and from a long oval cloud became just such a creature as Rudolf had described.

I do not myself know how it was done. Rudolf's studies were designed for more spectacular results than Sidney ever tried to achieve. It is certain that

the wizard had no apparatus of lanterns or mirrors. For the space of at least three minutes the beautiful phantom was visible, and looked quite substantial, yet people walked through her.

This was an obvious miracle. The ripple of hushed approbation and applause were most gratifying to the *gomchen*, who looked exceedingly handsome as he bowed before the audience. The lights went up, and he announced that he would now, with their permission, present to them Miss Lebreton, a lady who was a complete amateur, who had never trained, never performed professionally, but who could nevertheless surprise them all by her extraordinary powers.

Thus saying, he hastened behind the scenes, wiping his brow, for his late display had called for much concentration on his part.

Melisande and Canning were standing together in the wings, and Canning held in his hand a liqueur glass, which he smilingly offered to Rudolf.

"Taken it out of you a bit—eh, old man?" he said heartily. "Have a drop of Makalia to put you on the tape!"

As he took the glass, Rudolf uttered a word of fervent thanks.

There was just time to drink it while the assistants were placing on the stage the small table, the chairs, and one or two other necessary properties.

With a gasp of appreciation, Rudolf tossed off his potion, and, turning with outstretched hand to Melisande, led her out into the blaze of lights, to be greeted with a perfect torrent of clapping and shouting.

I heard it from the prompt box where I sat, feeling too tired to go out and see the full effect, but even with my side-long view I could see that she was wonderful. She looked like an angel, and bowed to the rapturous audience with just the right mixture of gratitude and dignity.

"I will first," said her impressario, "give Miss Lebreton something quite simple to do. I have written it down on this piece of paper. Will some gentleman or lady from the audience please take it from me and, after the experiment is over, read it aloud to the audience? I need hardly say that Miss Lebreton does not know what it is I ask her to do; but afterwards, in order to make sure on this point, she shall do something that one of you decide upon, and you shall hand the sealed instructions to me."

So saying, he held out a slip of paper in a sealed envelope to one of the audience—it was Colonel Bird, as a matter of fact—who held it unopened in his hand while a breathless silence fell.

Melisande sat like one who waits for a call or a message. Rudolf, who had been standing slightly behind her, moved suddenly and seated himself at the side of the table, an action which seemed to surprise her faintly. He leaned his head on his hand, and I could see that he had turned very white.

A curious hush—intense—expectant—had fallen upon us all. As the seconds ticked by I saw Melisande's expression change. She looked distressed and seemed uncertain. Rudolf neither spoke nor moved. He sat there like an automaton, and I very soon divined that something was wrong. For some reason which I could not fathom, he had ceased to exert any control over Melisande, who began to exhibit symptoms of alarm. She looked at him, she looked away from him, and passed a hand over her eyes. At last she rose to her feet, but stood wavering, evidently wholly at a loss.

The long-drawn-out wait became painful to everyone. The girl made two or three steps in Ilianeff's direction, as if trying to attract his attention.

In this she failed. He remained quite motionless, his eyes wide open, but fixed and staring. He had

taken up a pencil in his hand as he sat down, and this pencil now fell from his relaxed fingers and rolled away on the ground, the slight pattering sound being quite audible, so complete was the silence.

It was broken by the girl's utterance of a cry. It might have been a shriek, but she stifled it bravely.

She put out a hand and touched his shoulder. He neither spoke, moved, nor gave the least indication of life.

"He is ill! He is ill! Oh, come, please, somebody!" she cried.

Noel hastened from the wings, and was closely followed by Canning, who was in time to catch Melisande as she fell in a very pardonable fainting fit.

"Is there a doctor here?" cried Noel, after a short scrutiny of the motionless man at the table.

Then murmuring sound broke all out over the hall. The audience cried this thing and that. Dr. Saunders, our own doctor, was seen making his way along the tightly packed rows and hastening off, followed by Melian. Trix and Gracie were still in their dressing-room, changing into other clothes.

With a few brief words of apology, Noel ordered the curtain to be lowered, saying that he hoped the Professor's indisposition would be transient. Perhaps their kind friends would wait a few minutes to learn if the programme could be resumed? Meanwhile the orchestra would try to amuse them.

Few things have made me feel more thankful than the dropping of that curtain, enabling me to leave my seclusion in the prompt-box and to hasten on the stage, complete with white overall.

Noel had reached Rudolf first and spoke to him urgently.

"What's the matter?" he begged to know. "Feeling faint—eh?"

There was no reply. Even the man's eyeballs

did not move, although his eyes were wide open. He just sat there as if he had been turned to stone. Not a muscle of him stirred, though his breathing was just perceptible.

"What in the world can have happened?" gasped poor Noel. "Has his magic recoiled on himself?"

"Very possibly," said Canning, pushing the fainting Melisande into Noel's very willing arms. "Just see to Miss Lebreton, please; but she's all right, only a faint—let me have a look at this man—here, Ilianeff—get up, man!"

To our surprise and my horror, Ilianeff at once obeyed this command, rising from his seat as if propelled by some force outside himself. He did not rest his hands on the table or help himself in any way. He just stood up.

"See—he's all right," said Lionel. "All right, are you not—eh?"

There was no answer. The magician's eyes did not so much as flicker. He remained perfectly static.

"What's wrong?" went on Canning, somewhat roughly. "Better go and lie down, hadn't you?"

Slowly, but without any hesitation, Rudolf lay down where he was, full length on the floor.

"Oh, good Lord!" cried Lionel in consternation, while from behind me Melian said:

"He's dying."

"Dying—rubbish! Get up, man," snapped Canning; and instantly Rudolf obeyed and stood again on his feet.

At this juncture, Dr. Saunders, having lost his way among the purlieus of the elaborate new theatre, appeared at last upon the stage.

CHAPTER XIX

RUDOLF IN A RAGE

"Now," he ordered, "bring that sofa forward and lay him down. What's wrong with him? He seems to walk all right."

The couch was wheeled forward.

"One moment," put in Canning. "Hadn't we better get him off the stage? There's a big dressing-room or green-room or something just at the foot of these stairs."

"Yes; but how are we going to get him there?"

"I think he'll move under his own steam," said Canning: "he did what I told him just now. Ilianeff, go downstairs into the green-room, will you?"

Without a word or a look to anyone, the magician did as he was told. He turned in the required direction and went down the stairs firmly and steadily, his hands hanging down at his sides. Then, glancing neither to right nor left, he made straight for the room indicated.

We followed, all but Noel, who resigned his lovely burden most unwillingly to Teresa and Dixon, who had both been brought to the Hall to see the performance and were now summoned by Bella to our aid.

Noel, good fellow, pulled himself together and went to the help of his orchestra, now nearing the end of their repertoire. The lads suggested a "spot of gun-drill" and, the stage having been vacated, this was organised with some success and very quickly.

Meanwhile Rudolf, having walked into the green-room, stopped as if awaiting orders.

Canning turned to Dr. Saunders. "Tell him to

sit down or lie down or whatever it is you want him to do.''

The doctor, taking the hint, ordered the patient to recline upon some cushions hastily piled for him and sat down beside him. His preliminary feeling of the pulse caused him to look a little scared. It was barely perceptible.

"What on earth can be the matter with him?" he murmured, after trying all kinds of tests.

There was no reaction of any kind to touch. Rudolf suffered himself to be handled as if he were a bit of wood. His eyes seemed as if they did not see, yet he must have seen, for he had walked downstairs unaided. His eyeballs remained fixed while the doctor manipulated his eyelids.

But he responded to an order at once and with complete intelligence.

"Stretch out your hand—now the other—now stroke your knee—now close your eyes."

All these instructions were at once obeyed.

"Something has turned him into a robot," murmured the doctor.

"Surely it wasn't—it couldn't have been—that liqueur you gave him, Canning?" asked the Squadron-Leader.

"Why, how could it? You had some yourself. Has it made you feel funny?"

"On the contrary, I feel as I did the other day when you gave me a sip—particularly well and fit."

"That is the effect it has had on everyone who has tried it, Ilianeff himself included," replied Canning. "But perhaps one ought never to meddle with these savage drugs——"

"Savage?" queried Dr. Saunders quickly.

Canning explained that the Makalia was an African restorative reputed a specific for snake-bite, and acted strongly on the heart.

Some discussion ensued upon the treatment that ought to be given. Canning asked the doctor if he found the heart-action slackening or the pulse failing. Neither was the case. The heart was functioning with abnormal slowness, but, if anything, the pulse was the least bit stronger than when tested a few minutes previously.

Canning said he should be inclined to suppose that the seizure had nothing to do with the Makalia taken, but was the result of a too great strain upon faculties which had been forced to accomplish a feat for which they were hardly strong enough.

"I saw that illusion—that phantom he conjured up," said Dr. Saunders dreamily. "It was, I am privately convinced, nothing at all but an image transferred by a terrific exertion of will-power from his mind to ours. The effort required for such a feat is gigantic—it must be. Do you follow, Blackwood?"

"Then you are convinced that there was no charlatanry? In fact, we know he had no apparatus for producing such an illusion," mused Ian. "I should think you are right, doctor—that this is a sudden paralysis of a certain group of the brain-centres, and that with rest it ought to pass off. Should we administer stimulant, do you think?"

Dr. Saunders was of opinion that it would be best not to do so unless the respiration or heart-action showed signs of further failure, in which case oxygen should be at once administered.

Meanwhile it was quite evident that the performance could certainly not be continued that evening. Nothing remained but for Noel to apologize and dismiss the audience, which was good-naturedly applauding the efforts of the lads.

He explained, that as far as could be judged, the Professor was suffering from what they hoped would be a purely temporary paralysis of his mental powers.

The cause, the doctor believed, was over-exertion. An ambulance had been sent for, and the patient would be carried into the next street, to the Cottage Hospital, where he would be given every possible care and attention; but that he could appear again that evening was manifestly out of the question.

Poor Noel's apologies were cut short by very hearty applause. One of our local magnates stood up and moved a vote of thanks for the excellent entertainment they had already had, and of sympathy with the wonderful mystic for whose breakdown they all tendered sincere regrets, and added their hopes for a speedy and complete recovery.

These compliments over, Bella became the centre of an eager crowd of kindly inquirers, all saying how wonderful what they had seen had been, and adding their hopes that their pleasure had been merely postponed.

Needless to say, there were pressing inquiries after the welfare of the lovely medium, who was said to be recovering from her shock satisfactorily.

In the midst of it all, the actors appeared, and were the recipients of something like an ovation.

"Such a perfect programme!"

"Such a fascinating little play!"

"Such finished acting!"

"Of course it must be seen again! Everyone for miles round would want to get hold of it!"

Noel was a good deal soothed by the kindliness and sympathy. The lovely Miss Lebreton was also the subject of admiring and most flattering comment. How dreadful for her to come on the stage and to receive such a shock! She had borne herself with such dignity and self-control! After many inquiries, duly conveyed to Melisande in the dressing-room where she was recovering, she was persuaded to appear, which she did pathetically, leaning on Ian Blackwood's

arm, saying almost nothing, but turning the heads of all beholders most successfully.

What with one thing and another, it was very late before we found ourselves once more at home and looking back upon "our mixed bag" of success and failure.

The Warrens and Noel were of course with us, and so were Colonel Bird and Lionel Canning. We none of us felt like going to bed until we had thoroughly discussed the matter.

Bella insisted upon ringing up the hospital the moment we reached Savileas, and Melian herself, who had gone in the ambulance with her betrothed, came to the telephone and reported "No change". The patient was certainly no worse than when first admitted, but the doctor was more than puzzled. Two or three of the other doctors in the place had been called into consultation, and they were applying various tests, but all agreed that they had never seen anything at all like it before.

Asked whether she had ever previously seen the Professor affected in like manner, Melian earnestly asseverated that she never had. She had seen him in trance, but that was quite different.

Bella had ordered that cold supper should await us on our return, and we all felt the need of food.

We went accordingly into the dining-room, where we found soup and various viands. Ted and Martin concocted hot punch, and Teresa presently appeared, leading in Melisande, whom she had coaxed down-stairs.

The punch soon cheered up the pale heroine, and her colour and spirits both returned.

After supper Bella, who could not stand late hours, retired with apologies, but the rest of the party went back to the library to smoke and discuss. Nobody noticed the time, and when the sound of a car approach-

ing the front door and stopping caused us some surprise, we were astonished to realize the lateness of the hour.

"Why, who can that possibly be?" cried Trix. "Not your car, is it, Ben?"

As his denial was heard, the library door was flung open and in dashed Rudolf himself, closely followed by Melian.

Everyone exclaimed, many sprang to their feet. It was a Rudolf of whose existence I had had a very shrewd idea, but whom he had never let us see. He was in a flaming rage; his eyes looked red-hot, his hands were clenched. He came in like a tornado, and before anyone could say anything beyond "Oh!" and "Well!" he burst out furiously:

"Where is that swine, that dirty dog, that traitor, Canning?"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, what's this?" said Canning, rising lazily from his easy chair and confronting him good-humouredly.

There was for a time a confused medley of words from everyone, congratulating Rudolf on his recovery, wishing to know if he was indeed well again, making various inquiries, which he heeded no more than the buzzing of gnats.

"What hell-broth was that you gave me?" he shouted, rushing at Canning, grasping him by both shoulders, shaking him. "Don't suppose for a moment that you are going to get away with it—I'll have the law on you——"

Canning tossed away his cigarette, took the furious man by his two elbows, and disengaged his hold with no trouble at all.

He spoke soothingly. "Go steady, Ilianeff, go steady! We all appreciate that you must be feeling furious, but try to remember there are ladies here——"

"Ladies here? Then they had better leave the room," said Ilianeff, who was foaming at the mouth. "For there is here also the dirtiest cad it has ever been my lot to meet—a Borgia! a poisoner! And he asks me to pick my words! He had better know once for all that he must pick his drugs with more care! I'll expose him, I'll——"

Ted was equal to the occasion. He went up and laid a hand on the raving man's shoulder: "Be silent at once, or I'll have you thrown out—can't you see you are putting yourself in the wrong to begin with—all this abuse——? If you have any charge to make, we are here to listen and ready to sympathize, but you must control yourself."

Rudolf looked at him as if he would fly at his throat, then, with a gulp, began to simmer down. He gazed round vaguely for a few moments, until, obeying the pressure of Ted's hands on his shoulders, he sank into a chair, drew out a handkerchief, and passed it over his face.

"Canning," he muttered chokingly; "he's dangerous . . . don't let him go. He must be held. I've rung up the police; they'll be here directly, to arrest him on a charge of poisoning me."

"Really——" began Ted, and Melian broke in:

"I couldn't stop him, Ted. He *would* ring up the police, and of course they all saw what happened in the hall—his sudden seizure! But his recovery was just as sudden! One minute he was lying there like a log—the next he was on his feet and, except for his rage, seemed quite normal."

"What poison do you accuse Canning of administering which could have such a curious effect?" inquired Blackwood. "The whole thing seems to have lasted not much more than two hours from start to finish."

Rudolf leaned back, still wiping his forehead.

Martin had slipped out, and now returned with a mild whisky and soda. "That won't hurt you," he said soothingly. "Don't run your head up against a brick wall. You were just at the end of your powers and collapsed, that's all."

Rudolf laughed a trifle wildly, but he sat up and sipped his drink. "You ask—you ask what he gave me," he growled, glaring at Canning balefully. "Some African devilry. Their magic—what they taught him—his brand of magic—is all devilry!"

"Well, but," objected Ted, "it seems to me to be pretty mild devilry, if you recover from the attack so quickly and so completely."

"Only just too late," said Rudolf, with a gust of hysterical laughter. "Not only myself publicly shamed—shamed before an audience like that! But my lovely girl too. Don't you realize how disgraceful it is? Melisande, my pearl, will you ever forgive me?"

So saying, having set down his drink with a shaky hand, he sprang up, tottered to where Melisande sat, and fell at her feet, burying his face in her lap.

Canning made a kind of spring. It was only momentary. At once he had himself in hand again, and I don't think many people noticed it, they were so busy watching poor old Rudolf's debacle. But I could not tear my gaze from the snake-eyes of the man holding himself in leash. For the first time the thought came to me that the wizard might be justified in his accusation. There was murder in Canning's eyes if ever one can be said to see murder in the human eye.

Melisande bent a moment over the dark head in her shimmering lap. She laid her two hands upon his hair and murmured a few words. Then, as if a sharp tug had pulled her, she raised her eyes and looked across at Canning. Her colour faded. Her hands fell from Rudolf's head. Fortunately Ted

intervened, hauling the man to his feet with some visible annoyance.

"Come, come," he said sharply, "you've been through a great deal this evening, but it's all right now, and I'm going to pack you off to bed, my friend. You'll see things more plainly after you have had a good long sleep."

Ilianeff rose and stood, visibly pulling himself together. By the glance he gave Melisande, I conclude some message had passed between them when she laid her hands on his hair.

"The police," he muttered appealingly. "I must wait up to see them—I must make my charge, or they can't arrest this man——"

"The police are not coming to-night, Rudolf," said Melian, approaching him and taking his hand. "You misunderstood them, dear. The sergeant will be here to-morrow morning to take your depositions."

Rudolf's fury began to mount visibly. "And by that time he'll have gone—bolted," he gasped. "Do you all think I'm going to lie down under this treatment? I'll punish him myself if the law in England won't move——"

With fingers crooked he seemed about to make a spring at Canning, but Ted again took hold of him firmly.

"Steady the Buffs! Don't be an ass! The police could not arrest Canning, and you yourself know it, if you stop to think. He gave you a sip of a cordial you had taken the day before with the utmost benefit —hadn't you? At the same time he gave a dose to Melian and one to the Squadron-Leader, who were both the better for having taken it. Your attack can't be connected with anything you drank, and we all think it was the result of your almost superhuman exertion in creating the *dakini* for us. A temporary

paralysis of part of the brain—and it's all over now. Come to bed!"

It was touch and go. Ilianeff's whole frame was working, his eyes fixed fiercely upon Canning facing him, cool and self-possessed, with the snake-light in his eyes.

"If I go to bed now," said Rudolf slowly, evidently addressing Canning, "don't flatter yourself that you have got rid of me. I am not physically as strong as you, but I have perhaps more resources than you think for. I don't need to resort to poison to defeat an enemy—there are other ways——"

Canning broke in with a cool laugh: "Enemy! Oh, come now——"

Rudolf raised his voice to a shout: "Yes, enemy. Make no mistake! I'll grind you under my heel! You'll be sorry you ever dared to raise a hand against me. I am the most peaceful of men; but when I'm attacked, I defend myself. So look out, Mr. Serpent-Canning!"

CHAPTER XX MORE NOCTURNAL DISTURBANCE

CANNING made no reply to this, slightly shrugging his shoulders and turning away. As Ted left the room in charge of the reluctant and still-vociferating Rudolf, we all heaved a sigh of relief.

There was a sudden relaxation of strain, but the glances we gave each other were tinged with a kind of horror.

What a termination to our evening of entertainment !—And was it a termination ? I for one was far from assured of that.

Melisande struck a jarring note by querulously reproaching Martin for not having been at hand to come to her rescue when Rudolf had his seizure.

" I'm sorry," said Martin stiffly ; " I knew nothing of it until much later. I was in my dressing-room changing, as you know quite well."

Canning strolled up and stood looking down at her with an ironical smile. " Perhaps," he suggested, " Rhodes was purposely abstaining from watching you in the hands of that mountebank, posturing at his command before all those people ! Did you suppose he would like it ? "

" What ! " cried the beauty in apparent amazement, " did you not like my doing it, Martin ? "

" I was not consulted," said Martin shortly. " You did as you chose."

" No—no ! Not as *I* chose," she replied with pathos : " it was as Professor Ilianeff chose. I—I just *had* to do as he told me—don't you realize that, Martin ? "

He made no reply and she passed her hand over her eyes as if distracted.

"Why?" she faltered, "Mrs. Owen wished it—everybody urged me——"

"And you knew you could do it so well," said Melian Argent soothingly. "Come, you poor dear, you've been through a right-down nasty time; let me carry you off to bed, you must be craving for rest."

Evidently that was a fact. Although Melisande demurred at first, Melian led her off before long; but as they went towards the door, Melisande paused, just in front of Canning, and raised her eyes to his face with heart-rending reproach.

"So you were all disapproving?" Her voice quivered emotionally. "You all let me do it—you even urged me to do it, and you were disliking it all the time—disliking *me*—perhaps blaming me for doing it! Oh, I wish, I wish I had never come here! I—I haven't been happy here! Oh, Martin, why, why didn't you tell me what you thought of me, instead of standing there condemning me?"

"Nonsense!" said Canning, with a lightness that evidently covered some deeper feeling; "as if anybody could ever condemn a girl as beautiful as you are, Miss Lebreton! You know better than that. Cheer up! You are well aware that you have us all in the hollow of your hand! Rhodes' jealousy ought to flatter you, and I own I sympathized with him. In his place I shouldn't have liked to watch you being ordered about by a charlatan like Ilianeff. Good-night! Rest well, feeling quite sure that we all love you!"

She had stretched out her hand to him, and he kissed it gallantly, as she left the room in a chorus of "Good-nights" which practically drowned Melian's snappish objection to having Rudolf called a charlatan.

"He's a true mystic," said she dauntlessly over her shoulder, "worth a dozen of any of you others!"

Canning laughed and clapped his hands. "Bravo!" he cried, and the other men took up the clapping, so that the two girls got a really fine exit.

Upstairs, Melian found that Bella, feeling terribly sorry for Melisande, had sent Teresa to put her to bed, and so left her in those competent hands, and returned to us almost at once.

"I peeped in at Rudolf," she told us, "and I think he is already half asleep. He has got into bed and was lying waving one arm and muttering, but I don't fancy he heard me come in, and as I watched him his arm dropped and he relaxed into quietness."

"That's a mercy," said Gracie consolingly. "He'll have got over it by the morning, if he has a good sleep."

Ben and she were just departing, so we wished them good night. Colonel Bird and Canning, who was driving him back in his car, followed suit almost immediately.

Ted, Martin, Trix, Ian Blackwood, Melian, and I found ourselves together at last, and we looked at one another in a mixture of wonder and dismay.

"What was it?" we asked one another, and I found that they were all of them appealing to me. Of what nature was Rudolf's seizure? Was it the result of his own efforts, or had he, like a race-horse before its critical race, been "got at"? What did I think?

I said that, at the time, my ideas on the subject were vague, but Rudolf's attitude of violent resentment inclined me seriously to conjecture that Lionel Canning had actually given him a dose of some secret African drug which paralysed the brain for a time and then passed off.

We discussed this idea, which, in the light of what we knew of Canning's former acquaintance with

Melisande and of his own initiation into the secrets of the Snake-people, did not sound unlikely.

"I'm sure Dr. Saunders suspected some kind of poisoning," said Ian. "He said no degree of fatigue, nor even sudden mania could, so far as he was aware, account for the curious paralysis of initiative. The faculties seemed normal, but the man became an automaton."

"No doubt Canning much disliked the idea of the young lady being on exhibition," mused Ted. "He might have—— Oh, the de'il fly away with the fair Melisande!—When she wished she had never come here, I had to bite my tongue to prevent crying 'Amen to that!' Can't we push her off to-morrow? Somebody think up a good reason to compel her to clear out—— By the way, where was Finnegan to-night? Anyone see him in the hall? I didn't."

"Oh yes, he was there. I saw him," replied Ian. "Before the rumpus took place, that is. I don't remember seeing him afterwards."

"I wonder he didn't rush on to the stage. He must have been a bit furious," said Trix. "Well, if Canning is responsible, it was a dirty trick, and I don't like him one bit."

Discussion was still in full swing when suddenly, to our amazement, the telephone shrilled from the lobby, and we all jumped, and all, with the usual lack of originality, cried out, "Who can that be? What an hour to ring up!"

Martin was the only one who did not seem surprised; he was already half-way to the door. (We had drifted out into the hall to say Good-bye to our departing guests and, finding a splendid fire there, had remained around it, deep in our talk, instead of returning to the library.)

"It's for me," he gasped; "let me take the call!

I told them to ring me at any hour of the day or night if a message came through ! ”

“ Oh ! ” gasped Trix, and said no more.

We all stiffened to attention, for we all guessed that the callers must be Willis and Mills, and that they would hardly ring up in the small hours if the news were not very important.

It seemed a long time that we waited, nobody speaking or moving, but in reality it was not much more than the statutory three minutes before the door once more opened and Martin darted out—transfigured !

He went up to Trix, but he was so moved that for a moment or two he could not say a word. We all clustered round, thrilled by the suspense, though we sensed at once that the news was good. At last he said—as one reciting a lesson :

“ ‘ Limbuddy, County Down, August 30, 19—, Algernon Finnegan to Millicent Pumps aged 21. . . .’ I’m free ! Thank God ! ”

The silence broke up in our glad congratulations. Everyone wanted to shake hands, everyone was delighted. Melian and Ian, who knew nothing of the inquiries which had been set on foot, begged for information. The knowledge of the disgraceful plot which we had unearthed shocked the Squadron-Leader profoundly.

Ted laughed as he slapped Martin gaily on the back. “ I can’t help admiring the cool daring of the notion, you know ! And it very nearly succeeded ! They had kept things so completely dark, and it was only Onnie’s intuition that put us on to it. She felt so sure that Finnegan had a real hold on the girl ! ”

“ Yes, and it was Onnie who guessed that they must have been married in Ireland,” put in Trix, hugging me.

“ Quite ingenious,” was Ian’s comment, after

reflection. "They had only to force Martin to breaking point and bring their action at once, trusting to Melisande to work any jury; and then live happy ever after on the proceeds."

"Only Melisande doesn't really want to stay married to Finnegan. Either Rudolf or Canning would be more to her taste," laughed Trix, and caught herself up hastily. "Oh, Melian, my dear, I do beg your pardon!"

Melian smiled in her odd way. "Oh, never mind me! I understand Rudolf," replied she quite calmly.

She said no more, but I gathered that when she said she understood her betrothed, it was no idle boast. A true *gomchen* must not be addicted to kissing pretty mediums in a conservatory—or elsewhere. Therefore he should marry a lady who would not prove too disturbing to his senses.

Everyone talked at once. We had to face the fact that we should be obliged to pack off Melisande forthwith, since Bella would be so infuriated when she learned the truth that there was no knowing what she would do or say. Everyone agreed that the less said about it the better. We realized exultantly that nothing need be made public. Colonel Rhodes need never hear of his son's deplorable entanglement. The fair Miss Lebreton would simply fade out of the landscape, and her place would know her no more.

We were all friends, and could talk freely. There was much to say, and we said it for some while—until, in fact, I glanced at the clock and saw, to my horror, that it was just on three in the morning!

I urged immediate retirement, and everyone was preparing to obey me gladly when once more we heard the sound of a car approaching and coming to a standstill at the door.

"Don't tell me it's the police—what did that ass Ilianeff tell them?" cried Ted angrily. "And what

do they expect to find out at this hour of the morning? —Ugh!"

He went shiveringly behind the screens, and we heard him open the door, and then his voice: "Why—what?—Oh, it's you, is it?"

Something that sounded like an agitated apology, then Ted's voice again:

"Why, you're frozen stiff, sir—come in—they're all of 'em there—and there's still a good fire—don't try to tell me anything until you've thawed a bit!"

It was Colonel Bird who appeared—I had half expected it might be Finnegan! He looked quite grey with cold, and his forehead was furrowed with anxiety.

"Then you've seen or heard nothing of Lionel?" he asked, hardly able to articulate with his frozen lips. "He hasn't come back here?"

He was assured in chorus that we knew nothing of Canning since their departure together more than an hour previously. We helped our visitor to a seat near the glowing hearth, and Ted, taking up a kettle that was steaming at one side, produced hot toddy with the speed of a conjuring trick.

The Colonel was pitifully exhausted, and could say nothing consecutive until he had sipped his hot drink and his blood began once more to circulate.

He then told us that when he and Canning started, they switched on their head-lights, as the winding drive was pitch dark. They had proceeded about three-quarters of the way to the park gates and were going almost silently, the slope being so considerable that Canning, who was driving, had switched off the engine. Suddenly the lamps caught in their beam the figure of a man, moving fast.

At the point where he appeared there is a high bank on the left-hand side of the road, which had doubtless prevented his hearing or seeing the approach of the

car until he had started to run down the slope, and it was too late to stop himself. He dashed across from left to right straight in front of them. The Colonel's description of him was that he was tall and active, much muffled against the cold, and wearing a soft hat well dragged down over the eyes. Canning at once pulled up and called out to ask if he wanted a lift, fancying he must be a belated member of the household staff.

"The feller," declared the Colonel, "gave us no reply at all—did not even turn to look at us—but quickened his pace, making off among the trees. He was moving in the direction that would take him up to the house by a shorter cut than round the drive. 'Now, what's he after?' Canning had wondered: then seemed to make a decision. 'Wait a minute, sir; I think I'd better follow him up.' 'Have you got a torch?' I asked, and he said yes, he had a good one, but no weapon. 'However, there's something here that'll do at a pinch,' says he, and as far as I could see he dived under the seat and took something out—it was too dark for me to see what it was. Every moment counted, so he didn't wait to explain, but shut me in and dashed off.

"I felt a bit excited," went on our old friend, "so I pushed down the window-sash, leaned out, and watched his progress by the light that flickered among the tree-trunks which in that part of the park are oak, ash, and beech. . . ."

After some minutes the light disappeared rather suddenly, as if the bearer had gone down into a depression in the ground; and the watcher began to be sensible of the increasing cold. Hurriedly closing the window, he snuggled down under a fur robe, shivering for a bit until the warmth crept back to him.

"And then," he owned, "then, I fear—in fact I know—I fell asleep. I was a bit worn out and it was

very late. Don't know how long I slept—not very long, probably—but all of a sudden I was wide awake, and found he had been gone five and forty minutes. That set me to think. I was alone, and Lionel ought to have been back by then. I didn't know what to do. To go blundering in among the trees would be foolish. I switched on the lights, which I had turned off, thinking that would act as a guide to him if he was uncertain of his way back. I got out and walked about a bit, but the cold drove me back once more into the car. By then I felt certain that something must have happened to prevent Lionel's return. As soon as I had made up my mind about this, I began to think what it was best to do. . . . The only possible thing, it seemed, was to drive back here and see if I could knock somebody up. Of course I was a good deal nearer the lodge, but I was not sure that they had a telephone there, or any means of setting a search on foot. So I turned the car, with some trouble, and drove back slowly, lights full on, keeping a sharp look out. . . . I heard and saw no one, but as I drew near I could see that you still had lights on downstairs, and felt sure you would advise me what to do for the best."

CHAPTER XXI

WHAT WE FOUND

It is not easy to describe the nameless condition of uneasiness and helplessness into which we were flung by the Colonel's story.

The problem was—what, for the moment, could we do? At considerably past three o'clock on a bitterly cold January morning, how could we organize a search-party and beat the woods in the pitch dark? Not to mention the circumstance that we were all so tired out that we could hardly hold up our heads, and the only prospect in which we felt we could take a real interest was bed.

Yet the known facts were ominous. Canning was aware that he had left an old man in the lurch alone in a car in the small hours, and would certainly have returned to him unless unavoidably prevented. Either he had encountered an enemy or he had blundered into something in the dark and was hurt and unable to help himself.

In the extreme cold it was almost certain that if he were left lying injured out in the open, he would either die, or at least be frost-bitten, by sunrise.

The Colonel had kept his wits about him to the extent of leaving a message under a stone—he had spread out his handkerchief to be visible in the dark, and upon it he had placed an old envelope saying that he had returned to the Manor in hopes of news. This landmark would indicate the place whereat the car had stopped, and he described as exactly as he could the direction taken by Canning when he dashed off in pursuit of the man whom they had both distinctly seen.

Ted, Martin, and Ian all felt it incumbent upon them to go out and have a look. They went first to the stables and knocked up a couple of the men, ordering them to bring lanterns, and also Tartar, who, in view of the extreme cold, had not been turned out that night.

As soon as they were on the move I peremptorily ordered off Trix and Melian to bed, and tried hard to persuade Colonel Bird to follow their example, assuring him that there was a room perfectly ready, the gas fire could be lit, and a hot-water bottle procured in no time.

However, he firmly declined, begging to be allowed to sit by the fire and await news. Evidently he was very anxious, dreading he knew not what.

After a little brief discussion Martin was induced to remain with me, partly because he had the beginnings of a cold, and partly to be on hand in case of any sudden alarm when the other men had departed. He fetched coal from the huge bin always kept in the lobby and filled by Grindlay twice a day. He also, at my request, brought an eiderdown from upstairs to cover the Colonel warmly.

Thus comforted and fed, the old man dropped asleep almost immediately. Martin, after prowling up and down a bit, went into the library, where we had all been sitting, to write a letter—a device, I felt sure, to keep himself awake. I slipped off upstairs as soon as he was gone, to have a look round and see that all was quiet, for I felt nervous about Rudolf's wrought-up condition, and moreover was inclined to think that when we came out of the library into the hall to see the Colonel and Canning off, I had heard movements somewhere in the house downstairs. I therefore peeped into the kitchen too.

All seemed well, however. There were no lights anywhere, and I could hear no sounds.

Yet I felt perturbed to an extent that was a little surprising. Certainly we had had what one might call a crowded evening, and perhaps it had unnerved me a trifle. The trouble was that I did not know what I feared, unless it were a further visit from Finnegan to Melisande. I knew, however, that this was not so—at least there was no ladder at her window, for this I had been careful to ascertain.

Accordingly I came downstairs again slowly and deliberately; and as I descended, I was almost sure that I *did* hear slight sounds from somewhere within the house—very muffled and indistinct—so much so, in fact, that I put it down to the stillness of the silent night about me, which magnified small noises.

I sat down in an easy chair facing the sleeping Colonel, and there is not much doubt that I dozed a little.

Then in a moment I was wide awake, fancying someone had called my name.

There are two ways into the drawing-room at Savileas. One is right at the back of the hall and is the route by which visitors are usually conducted, because it leads directly into the large drawing-room. The alternative way is also from the hall, but in the front of the house, and it leads to the smaller or back drawing-room from which, as I have already mentioned, the winter-garden opens.

This door was exactly facing me as I sat on the further side of the hall hearth. It had not opened as far as my observation went, but it was nevertheless ajar; and Rudolf Ilianeff was standing before it, looking intently at me. There was something so compelling in his look that I sprang up and ran to him at once.

Until I was close to him I had no doubt that he stood there in bodily presence: but on approaching

I knew that this was not so. It was his wraith, as when he had previously appeared to me.

As his eyes met mine he smiled, very radiantly. It was a triumphant smile, for he knew he had succeeded in forcing me to be conscious of him.

He spoke to me as if he were speaking from an immense distance—on the wireless perhaps—and also as if he were receding from me even as he spoke.

"So you are conscious of me. I knew you were, though you tried to deceive me—and now it is very late—almost too late. I have only a few moments left. Listen! I was too strong for him spiritually —he had to use bodily force——"

The curious inner tones sank so low as to be hardly audible.

"She was not worth loving—I yielded to an unworthy impulse and that—gave him power—— Ah wait, there is one word more——" He seemed to gather all his forces into one final effort as he said, "It was—Kin-go-lio-lo. Remember! *Kin-go-lio-lo.* Write it—down."

The last three words were barely audible, and as the grotesque word passed his lips, he ceased to speak and his form faded. In another moment I stood alone there by the half-open door, through which swept an icy draught.

At first I remained there stupidly, not thinking at all. Then, as it were mechanically, I took up a pencil and wrote down in my notebook (which lay on a small table near) those savage syllables. What could they possibly mean? But he had evidently attached importance to them; and all in a moment I knew that they were his dying words to which I had just listened. A dreadful light broke in upon me—a consciousness of disaster. In a flash I knew where to look. I glanced around. The old Colonel slept

peacefully. Cold and shaking, I crept past him and tip-toed into the library, where Martin was just sealing a letter to his father in which he announced the joyful news of his engagement to Trix.

The beaming smile with which he looked up at me was wiped off his face suddenly and dreadfully: "Good Lord, Onnie, what's up?"

"Something has happened," I panted—"something terrible. We must go and look, but I—daren't go alone. It's in the winter-garden."

He sprang to his feet. "Something terrible—*in the winter-garden*. Have you been there?"

"No—no—I haven't. But it stands to reason, doesn't it? I've been so stupid, I ought to have realized that was the place to search. You see, all the time my mind was on the ladder, but of course that was too dangerous—besides, it was locked up—the ladder, I mean—Ted put it out of reach—I don't know what I'm saying—it doesn't matter—only we must go and look in the winter-garden at once!"

He rose from his seat, thrust his letter into his pocket, moved with me towards the door.

"What makes you think——" he was beginning, but suddenly I made a vehement gesture for silence.

"Listen," I breathed, and in the ensuing moment we both heard a noise. Hard to say what it sounded like. Someone crossing the hall, light-footed, but with a rush.

Martin sprang for the door, knocked down a chair, and I tripped over it. He just waited long enough to pick me up, with the result that when we ran out into the hall nothing was to be seen nor heard.

"Upstairs—quick," I gasped, and unfortunately he had hared off before I could tell him which way to turn when he reached the top.

He was certainly speedy, but very naturally he ran

towards Rudolf's room, and so lost the object of his search—Melisande, without a doubt.

She must have come in the other way, arriving at the back of the hall, through the large drawing-room, and up the hinder branch of the stairs which join at the half-landing.

Martin came back shaking his head and reporting that nobody was about.

"You heard it, though?"

"Certainly. Somebody ran across the back of the hall and upstairs—where could he have come from?"

"From the winter-garden—through the large drawing-room! For pity's sake don't delay! Something has happened there; we must go and investigate."

"Right you are! I've got a knuckle-duster in my pocket. Shall we want lights?"

"Oh no, there are plenty there, and I know where all the switches are—this way!"

We hastened across the hall to where the small door stood, still ajar. All was, however, quite dark within. Someone had carefully turned off the lights.

We crossed the small drawing-room, went to the glass doors, and I switched on a couple of points, illuminating the vast dim green alleys. The heavy perfume of tuberose and stephanotis caught me by the throat.

All was perfectly quiet, and we could see nothing until we came to the place where one turned at right angles to reach the central space under the cupola.

Then I could see that there was something on the floor—a man—lying on the turkey rug which was spread upon the tiles. There were switches here, and I turned them all on, so that the place blazed with light. Then I went right up to the prostrate man, and discovered that it was Finnegan. He lay per-

fectly inert, huddled, or rather sprawled, upon the ground. It seemed more than likely that he was dead, though I saw no blood.

"Finnegan," murmured Martin. "Somebody's put paid to his account, poor chap!"

(In spite of the awfulness of the moment, I was conscious of feeling that this was a pity. It made Melisande a widow, and it suited us best that she should be still a wife.)

Before taking any measures to ascertain his condition, we looked round to see if anyone else were present, and it was not till then that the full horror burst upon us. For it was as I had foreboded. Rudolf Ilianeff sat there facing us, with eyes apparently watching our advance.

For the moment I had a shock of surprise, for he was sitting more or less upright, on the settee, and I could still have sworn that he was looking at us. He wore a half smile, very peaceful, and I had to go quite near to him before I noticed that there were one or two splashes of blood upon his forehead.

"Don't touch him," was my hurried murmur as Martin approached. "He was hit, don't you think —from behind?"

Martin went round to the back of the couch and uttered a low cry of horror.

"Oh, how beastly!" he gasped boyishly, and his shoulders heaved as if he would be sick, but he mastered himself.

"He was struck unawares—the back of his head —is—*frightful*," he stammered.

It was indeed. The horrible wound had bled a good deal, showing that death had not been by any means instantaneous. The expression was curiously noble, the features composed. He looked handsomer than he had been in life, his somewhat too-deep

colouring having faded enough to show up the fine lines of his countenance.

On the breast and shoulder of his dress-coat were various tiny sparkling points of light here and there, which I quickly identified as from the diamanté trimming of Melisande's silver-tissue frock. Looking closely, I noticed that there were traces of lipstick on his paling mouth, and a golden hair upon his lapel. He must literally have been murdered while holding the girl in his arms.

There was no doubt at all that he was dead. The rapt expression of his face, the almost smile in the sightless eyes, affected me most painfully, like an outrage. It seemed so pitiful that a worthless creature like Melisande should be able to bring to nothing a mind like that of Ilianeff, who had so many of the necessary qualifications of a sage—everything, in short, except the iron self-control, that central, essential thing. As I gazed upon him, the words of the old oriental moralist ran in my mind—

> Stolen waters are sweet,
> And bread eaten in secret is pleasant.
> But he knoweth not that the dead are there;
> That her guests are in the depths of hell.

I stood rigidly staring, entirely at a loss. The whole thing seemed too much—too awful. Staggering to a chair, I sat down to reinforce my wobbly knees. I could not even speculate upon the problem of who had killed Finnegan. . . . Surely not Melisande . . . that was too wildly improbable.

She had been there, of course. She must have crept to the door and made her escape while I was in the library with Martin.

"Heavens above, what now?" I heard him mutter as he turned away from the dead Rudolf and came back to the body of Finnegan.

Here were signs of a struggle—the matting on the floor had been moved about, several flower-pots knocked down, a table and two chairs tipped over. The man's knuckles were lacerated, his hair rumpled, his collar and tie disarranged. There had been a fight. But in that fight Rudolf could have taken no part. Nothing about *him* was disarranged. . . .

Martin's voice came as if from a distance :

"Onnie, can you hear? Is your mind registering?"

"I—I—yes, I think so," I murmured idiotically.

"Because, you see, we must pull ourselves together. I somehow don't fancy this chap's dead. He's taken a terrific knock-out, probably badly concussed—but he doesn't feel to me as if he's dead; and somehow or other we've got to get help, haven't we?"

I took a deep breath. "Yes, of course. Forgive me. All right now." I rose to my feet, holding my throbbing head. "Let me see. I think Melian, to begin with—— Then—or perhaps first of all—before anything else—I ought to ring up the police, ought I not?"

"I think so. You see, I feel we mustn't let these bodies out of our sight for a moment. There's evidence—valuable evidence—on the front of poor Rudolf's coat. She——" He paused a minute, with a look of malice in his eye that surprised me—"I'm talking of Mrs. Finnegan," he said—"she was too badly scared to do anything but run away at the moment, but I wouldn't put it past her to come down here again after a bit and see what she could do to clean up. My word, it's a filthy mess, isn't it? Poor Mrs. Owen! What will she say?"

As he spoke there flooded into my mind the memory of our joy and confidence only an hour or so ago. "Nothing need be made public," we had triumphantly said. And now? Would there be anything, even

the smallest detail of our private lives—any of us—that would not be dragged out into the limelight of the public press?

However, these things must not be dwelt upon. It was needful to concentrate upon what lay immediately ahead; and I was resolutely turning my back upon the field of slaughter and moving towards the passage that led back to the house, when a sharp knocking from the opposite direction upon the outer doors of the great glass-house startled us both.

CHAPTER XXII

CONFUSION REIGNS

I CANNOT say what was Martin's first reaction to the sound of that vehement knocking for admittance, but I do know that my own nerves were so jangled as to convince me that there were enemies without.

There had been slaughter—violent death—crime in the place where we stood, only quite recently; and I could not believe that it could have been what is, I think, known as an "inside job". It must be the work of some enemies who were now determined to get in—our lights had attracted them, and what protection was a glass-house against bandits? They could burst in as and when they chose.

I crept closer up to Martin and panted out, "What can we do? What *can* we do except put out the lights?"

"Wait," he said. "Yes, you put out the lights, and I'll go to the door and reconnoitre with a torch. . . ."

At that moment I heard a sound that brought me back as it were to life and sanity again—Tartar's whimper. He was snuffling, sobbing at the door. "Oh, what fools we are! It's all right, it's them—our own lot," I said. "Let them in at once! Thank God they've come back!"

We both ran down the walk to the door and tugged at the big bolts. In dashed Tartar, whining and shaking with excitement. In a moment I remembered his feud with Finnegan and I grabbed his collar.

"Hold him!" I gasped as the men pressed in.

"There's been murder here—— Oh, Ted, Ted! Why didn't I realize that it would be here?"

"Murder? Onnie, you're raving!"

He pushed himself into the foreground, and I stood back to allow of his entrance and that of Ian, followed by the stable-men and, rather to my surprise, by Lionel Canning, who looked agitated and excited.

For some occult reason—perhaps the unseen influence of Sidney and Rudolf—I was now comparatively calm and could speak. Martin seemed overwhelmed, but I was able to give a more or less coherent account of what had happened. The only thing I did not mention was the appearance of Rudolf to me. I could see that they all wondered why I had suddenly come to the conclusion that the winter-garden must be visited. I knew that this had puzzled Martin, but there was no time to go into it now. The other curious features of the drama had to be investigated first. We had to find out how the murderer had entered and left—for the big doors through which the search-party had just returned were locked and bolted on the inside—and a murderer there must have been, because, if not, who had killed Finnegan?

"We were on our way back," explained Ted breathlessly, "after finding Canning, when we saw the lights go up here. We had fancied once before that we saw lights, when we were at the other end of the Park—that is, Casson declared that he saw them, but we had to go down that dip in the park from whence you can't see the house at all; and when we came up on the farther side, all was dark. . . . Here, Tartar, lie down, can't you? What the devil's the matter?"

"It's his old enemy, Finnegan," I explained. "He's lying here on the floor, either dead or dying. Come at once; this is no time for talk—we must have

a doctor—and tell Casson to hold the dog—better shut him out, perhaps."

As Tartar continued to rage, they finally did this, while the rest of the party hurried forward and, reaching the central space, stood transfixed at the sight of Rudolf seated there before them, so dignified and tranquil that at first nobody could believe that he was dead.

That sight seemed to paralyse everyone. In the tales one reads, the sudden discovery of a corpse in the intimacies of one's home never seems unduly astounding, and everyone knows what to do about it; but it must be confessed that the phenomenon had the effect of knocking us all completely endways. Violent death just seemed incredible.

As we approached, Ted had told me in a few hurried words of their coming upon Canning wandering benighted, quite unable to find his way to the place where he had left the car. I was surprised. This was most unlike the seasoned campaigner in African deserts, and I should hardly have supposed it possible.

I indulged in a little private wonder while they all inspected the horrible injuries to the back of Rudolf's head and then proceeded to examine Finnegan.

" He's alive all right : his pulse is quite perceptible," muttered Ian, " but he's taken an awful crack. This was no mere fight—he's been hit with a weapon—no telling what the injury to the brain may be. Hadn't we better lift him? His life may depend upon his having instant attention."

Ted, also stooping over him, made the discovery that one of his arms was broken.

" Oh," I urged, " don't you think we had better not meddle, Martin? Run for some pillows and a rug—rouse Teresa, tell her we must have hot-water bottles —and perhaps brandy—it's warm in here, and I think it would be best to leave him where he is and ring up

the Cottage Hospital and tell them to send an ambulance at once. That's quite near, and he would have proper nursing from the first. We can't keep him here : it would be more than my sister is equal to."

I ran off, with Martin in attendance, to see to these various matters, and succeeded in connecting with the Cottage Hospital in wonderfully quick time. The nurse on duty said she would 'phone for the ambulance at once, and I went back as fast as I could to make sure that they had covered up Finnegan and put a pillow under his head.

Ian was superintending, and Canning was standing with his hands behind him in the central space, gazing round as if he were looking for someone. "I suppose," he said to Martin, "that you made sure there is nobody hiding in this place? Half a dozen murderers might easily be concealed hereabouts—eh?"

Martin, confused, owned that he had not thought of this, and at a word from Ted, Grindlay and Casson plunged in among the tall palms, bamboos, and tropical trees which made dense thickets round the central space. (It may be mentioned here that they found nobody, and saw no evidence of anyone's having been there.)

While they were investigating, we were consulting, I fear rather wildly, as to our right course of procedure. The police must be summoned, but before doing this Ted thought he ought first to arouse Mrs. Owen and tell her what had happened : "Or perhaps Onnie had better do it. She's much less likely to fly off the handle if Onnie tackles her."

"Anyway, let's get busy about it," said Ted, with an urgent hand on my elbow.

Martin at that moment returned with a hot-water bottle. He also brought Melian, whom he had awakened; but she was at first far too horrified and astounded at the sight of Rudolf to be of any use.

Canning was kneeling brooding over Finnegan, and as I came up with the bottle, he turned to me, and something in the expression of his snake-eyes sent a chill down my back.

"I'll look after this chap until the ambulance comes," he volunteered.

"No," I replied resolutely, though at the moment I myself hardly knew why I was so determined not to leave him in charge. "Grindlay will do that. You must please come and relieve the Colonel's mind."

He hesitated. I had an idea that he was going to defy me and insist. He is not an easy man to oppose; but at the moment Ian appeared and called to him that the Colonel was asking for him. He rose from his knees and reluctantly allowed Grindlay to take his place.

As he walked beside me along the path that led to the glass doors, he begged me urgently not to tell Colonel Bird the awful news. "The best thing I can do is to tool the old boy home at once," said he. "He will be urgently wishing to relieve the mind of the family, and, after all, we are only in your way here. Perhaps I could help you by calling at the police-station as we go?"

We found the Colonel seriously annoyed and inclined to be very angry with him for his behaviour. "What on earth did you want to jump out of the car like that for, leaving me there to freeze?" he cried, ready, as so many people are, to scold the subject of their anxiety the moment that anxiety is removed! "Perhaps you're satisfied now, having kept these good fellers out of their beds, scouring about in the dark for you. What did you think you were doing—eh?"

Canning's penitence was disarming. He confessed that in the pitch darkness among the thick trees he had very simply lost not only the man he was pursuing, but also his way. He had found a path, by the light

of his torch, and followed it for a long distance before discovering that he was wandering farther and farther into the mazes of the woods; and on his way back he had come upon forked paths and gone wrong again.

" In short, I've made a bally ass of myself, and you'll never trust me again, will you? " he said good-humouredly, " but at least I can run you home and explain—come on, we'd better be off at once."

Accordingly they were packed into the car, whose bonnet had been so well muffled in skin rugs from the hall that she departed with very little demur, and were off in the windless, relentless cold of a night that seemed to me as if it would never end.

I had not a moment for reflection, because I had to go at once and awaken poor Bella from her cosy slumbers to the knowledge that her blameless home seemed to have become the haunt of dangerous gangsters.

Fortunately her earliest reaction from the shock took the form of a perfect madness of terror lest worse befall, and an instant command that the police should be notified without delay.

Ted went and telephoned accordingly, and his news caused the utmost consternation at Baxted head-quarters. They promised that a Sergeant and an Inspector should be round at once, and said they were telephoning the Superintendent and the police doctor also.

They seemed a little perturbed at my having sent for the hospital ambulance, and begged that Finnegan should be left where he was until their arrival.

" How do they expect one to know by instinct what to do in a case like this? " demanded Ted peevishly. " One might suppose that to find corpses on the carpet was all in the usual run of events——"

He set himself to pet and soothe Bella as nobody

but himself could do, and after a while her agitation subsided a little.

By this time Martin had roused Trix, and she and Melian were both on duty, helping Teresa, heating broth, and so on.

The whole scene swam before me, and I was thankful for a cup of strong coffee which Melian pressed upon me. She was full of courage, terribly hard hit, as I could see, but doing all she could for everybody else.

Just as I had gulped down my coffee, a vigorous rat-tat upon the door announced the arrival of the police, and I staggered down, clinging to Ted's arm, to receive them.

CHAPTER XXIII

MELISANDE AT BAY

WHAT with want of sleep and horror, my mind was by now almost a blank, and Inspector Drew was evidently very sorry for me. We knew each other, for he and I had worked together over a very distressing cruelty to children case in Baxted two years before. I knew he had considered me a good witness, and he had thanked me for my help. When he saw me he said, " Thank goodness we've got Mrs. Zangula here—she'll help us straighten out any tangle."

" After I've been to bed I'll do what I can," I faltered. " But at the moment I'm all in——"

He was as considerate as possible, but he was quite firm about the necessity of having a few words with me before I retired—pointing out what, of course, I already knew : that this was a case of murder in its most brutal form, and each moment was valuable.

I had a brief respite while he and his men were conducted to view the scene of the tragedy and inspect the bodies. Ted drew me out of the hall into the library and made me sit still until I should be wanted. I heard more cars drive up, the knocker was again plied, and the photographers and the police doctor arrived. The latter was accompanied by Dr. Saunders, whom the Inspector had very sensibly summoned, as he had seen and treated Rudolf in the Hall at the time of his seizure. Both the doctors proceeded at once to the winter-garden, and for a time I was left to try to sift my thoughts. Who ?—and how ?—I was not in the least sure, because it all seemed impossible.

I was almost asleep when the Inspector returned, accompanied by P.C. Roberts with his note-book and sat down beside me to take my deposition.

Fortunately he had been present in the Coronation Hall that evening, so he did not need to be told what had happened there. In fact, he had himself endeavoured to persuade Professor Ilianeff to remain quietly at the hospital for what was left of the night, instead of dashing back to Savileas.

"Poor fellow, if only he had taken your advice!" I said, choking back tears; and then I told him as briefly as possible what had happened on Rudolf's return, his state of violent excitement, and his accusing Canning of having drugged him.

"Was there any foundation for that charge?" the Inspector wished to know.

"Not to my knowledge," was all that could be said.

I went on to relate what had subsequently happened —how we soothed Rudolf and got him to bed and how after our visitors had left we sat up some time discussing among ourselves the evening's untoward events. In the midst of our talk we heard a car, Mr. Owen had gone out to investigate, and found that Colonel Bird had returned without Mr. Canning, who had seen a man in the park and gone chasing him into the wood. I made it clear that both those in the car had plainly seen the man in question; and told him how a search-party had set out to look for Canning, who might have lost his way, seeing that he did not know the lie of the land. Mr. Rhodes and I had sat up to await their return; and I had thought more than once I heard sounds of movement or distant voices in the house, as if someone were about. I remembered that a week or two previously I had seen someone lurking just outside the winter-garden; in view of that circumstance I went to Mr. Rhodes and urged him to come with me and look.

"Quite," said the Inspector thoughtfully. "Naturally you connected the man you had seen with the Colonel's story of a man crossing the park at two o'clock in the morning."

I murmured that this was so, and went on to tell what we had found.

"Nobody else was present when you arrived on the scene? Only the Professor and this other man—Finnegan, is the name?"

"No one else."

"Can you make any suggestion, Mrs. Zangula, as to how this man Finnegan got in?"

"I think he must have been admitted by someone."

"And Professor Ilianeff—how did he come downstairs? You thought him safely in bed?"

"Certainly I did. But he could easily have gone downstairs unseen if he had wished to do so——"

"Although you were all in the hall?"

"Yes, in spite of that. If he moved quietly. Go and ask Mr. Owen to show you the back branch of the staircase, and how you can reach the winter-garden through the two drawing-rooms without crossing the hall at all."

Drew did as I suggested, and when he returned I volunteered that it seemed quite possible that this was not the first rendezvous of which the winter-garden had been the scene.

"Then do you suppose that it was Professor Ilianeff who admitted Finnegan?"

"No, I am almost certain that he did not. That is what is puzzling me. I cannot think of any reason why he should."

The Inspector evidently thought that there might be reasons of which I knew nothing. I could see that he was inclined to put Rudolf in the class of professional entertainers, quite possibly even among professional burglars. Moreover, Casson and Grind-

lay had evidently told him of Finnegan's prowling at night and exciting the undying enmity of Tartar.

"Is there any other way into the glass-house from outside, besides those big doors at the end?" was his next question.

With a start I remembered that there certainly is. Had I been in my usual mental state, I should have thought of that at once. At the back of the house there is what we call the gardeners' door, on the farther side of the winter-garden. Anyone coming in that way would approach the central space from behind the settee whereon Rudolf sat. Only a narrow path leads from this entrance, and practically nobody uses it except the gardeners, or Bella and myself when we are ordering the re-arrangements of the plants. Drew fastened on this information.

"It would, of course, be locked at night?"

"Of course. Grindlay does all the locking-up, and, as you know, he is most trustworthy."

Roberts was sent to find Grindlay and ask him to show him the door. "And no fingering, mind, and be careful where you put your feet——"

"Well now, ma'am," said the Inspector with delicacy, "we come to the lady in the case. It is evident, I think, that the Professor had an appointment; and, judging by the evidence on his coat, which you yourself may have observed—this lady was the one who posed as his medium this evening at the Coronation Hall?"

"I should think that is practically certain."

"And you are prepared to assure me that she was not present when you and Mr. Rhodes came on the scene?"

"No. She was not present," I said, looking him straight in the eyes, "but Mr. Rhodes and I both heard her run upstairs just before we left the library."

His keen eyes seemed to bore into mine. "Hard to

understand why she ran away without raising an alarm," he said slowly. " I have sent that capable maid, Teresa, upstairs to fetch her. She must give some account of herself. May I ask if she is a personal friend of yours, Mrs. Zangula? "

" She is not. She has, however, been staying in the house since Christmas."

" I conclude that she was introduced professionally by Professor Ilianeff? "

" No, no! That is not so. She was a stranger to him, but she proved to be a wonderful medium——"

" May I ask if she arrived here first, or was he here before she came? "

" I—— Oh, I suppose they came more or less simultaneously."

" And you have strong reason to believe that they did not know each other previously? "

" Well, perhaps not so very strong—I mean we all took it for granted—— But I think you have a wrong idea of Professor Ilianeff. I personally have a high opinion of him——"

At this point P.C. Roberts came back. Grindlay was with him. They had found the garden door locked, as Grindlay had left it when going his rounds. But the key was not there, and Grindlay had left it as usual on the inside of the door. On this point he was quite positive :

" There's but the one key to that door," he said, " and I never take it out. Each morning I go in at the big doors and open the gardeners' door from inside, so the men can get about their sweeping and watering. It's never locked in the daytime. I take my oath I locked it last night—just after five o'clock it must have been."

" Then one supposes that the murderer took out the key to enable him to lock the door after him. It was not on the outside, was it? "

"No, sir. It was nowhere about, that we could see——"

As he spoke, the library door was opened by Teresa from the outside, and in the aperture stood, as one might think, the figure of an angel.

Drew sprang to his feet. Melisande, with her golden hair slightly ruffled, wearing a rest-gown of flowered and gold brocade, stood blinking in the light, an expression of bewildered pathos on her lovely face. She looked like a sleepy child suddenly dragged from rest by the brutal soldiery.

A few words of introduction were said, Grindlay and Ted were dismissed, but the Inspector asked me to remain while he very briefly interrogated the young lady. He was quite polite, placed a chair for her, and apologized for rousing her from sleep; but I could see from his tone that her beauty and her youth did not, as they say, cut any ice with him.

"My first question, Miss Lebreton, is this: At what time did you leave the winter-garden to-night—or rather this morning?"

Her eyes and mouth grew into three round O's of amazement.

"I don't understand—— What *do* you mean? Oh, what *is* all this about? I assure you I had nothing to do with the drugging of Professor Ilianeff last night, if he was drugged. I know no more of it than you do—it was dreadful for me, and I am quite exhausted. Please have pity on me!" Her jewelled hand, white as snow, drew from the recesses of her wrap a tiny lace handkerchief, which she pressed to her eyes. "Mrs. Zangula can tell you I knew nothing of it! Nothing!" she affirmed, weeping softly in her inimitable way, the great tears rolling down her cheeks.

"You mistook my question, Miss—er—Lebreton. I do not ask you about the scene in the Hall last night.

I ask you about the last time you saw Professor Ilianeff—in the winter-garden. At what time did you leave him? "

She grew rigid. Her hands clenched themselves on the wisp of lace she held. She was so used to telling lies that I don't think it had struck her how worse than useless a lie would be in these circumstances. " I understand less than ever. When was I in the winter-garden with the Professor? "

" That is precisely what I want to know and what you can tell me."

She paused a moment, and then stuck to her lie firmly. " You are mistaken. I was not there."

" It seems a pity," he said, not unkindly, " not to tell the truth about this. You were heard to go upstairs, a minute or two before Mrs. Zangula and Mr. Rhodes went into the winter-garden. Moreover, you left unmistakable traces of your presence there. You had better not deny it, because to do so throws on you suspicion which is perhaps not deserved. In what condition did you leave the Professor? Perhaps you can tell us that? "

For a moment even I thought she was going to break down. But her reaction was quite otherwise, and as unexpected to Drew as to myself. She drew herself upright, dashed away the pearly drops, and flung an indignant glance at her questioner.

" I am not going to be bullied," said she clearly. " You are a police officer, so you tell me. Then you know I am not obliged to answer your questions. I will not answer any more."

" That's as you please; but may I point out how unwise it is from your point of view? There have been two murders here this night, and even if you did not actually commit them, you put yourself completely in the wrong by running away without rousing the house. On this charge alone I can detain you——"

She held up her hand. "But you can't make me speak without protection. I must have a lawyer before I answer questions. Mrs. Zangula, you won't sit there and let this man third-degree me?"

"I don't know what you mean by third-degreeing. I am not American; but I do see how vital it is for you that you should try to explain your conduct to the Inspector. He is not your enemy, he only wants to find out the truth; and you have done yourself untold harm by beginning with a lie—a stupid lie, because it can so easily be refuted. You know you were in the winter-garden with Rudolf. Why can't you say so?"

She turned white under her make-up, but she held firm. "I tell you I won't be brow-beaten. Please make him send for Mr. Rhodes—my fiancé," she said haughtily.

But that was too much for me. It brought my forbearance to the snapping point.

"Oh, I think that is going a little too far—*Mrs. Finnegan*," I said, slowly and with emphasis.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MYSTERY WORD

MELISANDE leapt to her feet. She glared at me like a tigress. The sorrowing angel was wholly submerged in Millie Pumps of the Saloon Bar. I cannot remember what she said. I know that among other epithets she called me a "filthy spy". The torrent of wild abuse that flowed from her surprised even me. The Inspector was quietly amused. He did not check her. It could be seen that he found this outburst most revealing. When she paused for breath I remarked calmly:

"Well, then, if you don't like your husband's name, why not stick to your real one—Millie Pumps?"

"Oh," said the Inspector with interest, "then Lebreton is just your professional or stage name, I suppose? How long have you worked for Professor Ilianeff?"

This was a false step, and she took advantage of it like lightning. "You don't know what you are talking about. I met the Professor for the first time here, at Savileas, less than three weeks ago. I can swear that this is the cold truth. I only consented to take part in his programme because I was begged to do so—this cat here can tell you that!—and now I am insulted because I gave a helping hand! Oh, I wish with all my heart that I had never come near this hateful house nor seen these detestable people——"

"Well, at least," put in the Inspector patiently, "will you tell me this much? Was the Professor alive or dead when you ran upstairs this evening?"

She shuddered, gasped, and I thought would give

way, but at last she muttered, as if she could not help it, "He was dead."

"Exactly. Then you can doubtless tell us who killed him?"

She shook her head slowly, obstinately. "I certainly cannot. I don't know."

"*You don't know?* But the lights were on?"

She panted. "He came up behind. Do you expect me to know the names of all the criminals in the county? It was a man—I can tell you no more! I thought he was going to kill me too!"

"Was it he who killed your—er—husband?"

"What do you mean, my husband?"

"Mrs. Zangula, who has a high character for accuracy, says that Instructor Finnegan of Baxted Aerodrome is your husband."

"I deny it," she snapped.

"And would you deny it with equal firmness if I told you that Instructor Finnegan is *not* dead, and will probably recover?"

That was unexpected. She had evidently believed him dead. From her staring, fixed gaze I deduced that poor Algie's death would have made things much easier for her.

"You left him, seriously wounded, lying on the ground. It does not speak highly for your humanity, Mrs. Finnegan."

"It does not speak highly for *your* humanity, to bully and badger a wretched woman already distracted by grief and exhausted," she flung back. "If that bobby over there has been taking notes of this conversation, it may interest you to know that I hereby declare that I will not stand by a single word I have spoken. It has all been forced out of me by terrorism and bullying. I repudiate everything I've said, from first to last."

"Ah! Then do you deny that you said that the murderer was unknown to you?"

"On the contrary, I persist in affirming that the murderer was unknown to me."

"Very well. Reflection may cause you to change your mind about that as about other things. Meanwhile we need not trouble you further, I think," was his calm reply. With a bow he held the door open for her. Her dismissal took her by surprise, but she fled.

"Well," he said, turning to me with a smile, "the plot thickens; and my guess is that that young lady is the storm-centre. It is a shame to press you further, Mrs. Zangula, when you have been so good, but may I ask if you know for a fact that she is married to that young Finnegan?"

"Yes, I know it for a fact," I told him; "though it only came to light quite recently, and there is a good deal to put before you on that head; but I shall leave it to Mr. Owen and his friend Mr. Rhodes to tell you more about it. Only I want you to promise me not to mention it. I just let her know I knew in order to warn her that she was exposed. But, for reasons you will understand when they explain matters to you, it is most important for it not to be made public just now."

"Quite," he said kindly. "I think and hope you will find me discreet. What I must now do is to interrogate Mr. Canning."

In act to leave the room I paused and coloured with vexation.

"Oh, Inspector, I'm sorry, but you can't do that. He went off just before you arrived, to drive Colonel Bird home."

The Inspector was evidently and, as I felt justly, annoyed.

"Really, Mrs. Zangula, I should have thought that anyone with your intelligence would not have required

any technical knowledge of police procedure to be aware that, after what has happened in this house, everyone on the premises must remain until the police arrived.''

" I am dreadfully sorry, Inspector; I never gave it a thought.''

" You did not connect Mr. Canning and the man he followed in the park in your thoughts with the man murdered in the winter-garden? ''

I can only hope my hesitation was not obvious. " Why should I? Incidentally, Mr. Canning has only very recently come to the neighbourhood, and can have had no knowledge of the existence of the gardeners' door, which it is agreed is the way the murderer got in——'' I put my hands to my head. " Please excuse me now. Mr. Owen will tell you all you want to know. I really think I *must* go upstairs.''

He opened the door for me, and said apologetically that he had no wish at all to be tiresome, but that Canning should have cleared off was most annoying.

" He told Mr. Owen what he did—how he lost the man he was following——''

" Did he say he did not know whom he was following? ''

" I can't tell you that——''

" Because I understand that he and Finnegan are both employed at the Baxted 'Drome—they ought to know each other—but, forgive me, I won't badger you any more. I'll find Teresa and ask her to show me which is Mrs. Finnegan's room. I must post a man outside, we can't have her giving us the slip too—— Oh, just one thing more. Do you know Mr. Canning's address? ''

This I was able to give him forthwith. I explained to him that Mr. Canning was quite an eminent explorer, that he was related to the Birds, and that the Colonel had lent him the bungalow in his grounds,

known as The Digs. I think this information reassured him a little. The knowledge of who Canning was, and his being as it were the Colonel's guest, made it seem unlikely, to say the least of it, that he should commit a murder.

Ted was just outside, and I told him to do all he could to help Inspector Drew. "The Inspector and I are old acquaintances," I explained. I also admitted that I had allowed Melisande to know that she was unmasked, but that I was counting on Drew's discretion not to permit the newspapers to get hold of it. Ted seemed to think I had done wisely in letting the adventuress know that her game was up. He asked how she took it, and was amused when I told him of the stream of invective that I had provoked.

He was surprised and much concerned to hear that the Inspector said we ought not to have let Canning and the Colonel go.

"Oh, but why?" he asked wonderingly. "They are not in it—how could they have been? Canning was out in the grounds——"

"According to Mrs. Zangula's account, he had been missing for more than an hour," put in Drew.

"Yes, but he had lost his bearings. Took a wrong path: we found him a long way from the house—right down by the lake. He was most grateful for being picked up, and was in a hurry to get back, because he was expecting a summons—from Government, I think—to fly over to France to-day——"

Drew started. "Good Lord, sir! To France! He must be stopped," cried he urgently. "Is he on the 'phone, do you know?"

Ted stared at him a moment, and then collected himself to do all he could. The two consulted as to whether to ring up the Bungalow or Broadlands, and they went off together to the telephone, while I dragged myself upstairs at last.

But I did not reach my room unmolested even then, for on the landing I encountered Dr. Saunders. I was glad to know that he had been with Bella and had given her something to calm her nerves and make her sleep. She was, he said, in a state of great agitation, and had asked for all the details he could give. He knew I should thank him for his good offices in relieving me of this task.

"As for you," he went on, scowling at me as if I were in disgrace. "I'll just come along with you, Madam, and take your temperature. I don't like the looks of you. You're all in."

"I've had nearly enough," I owned.

Things had been pretty hectic for the past three weeks and now this awful culmination! It was humiliating to me that the clinical thermometer disclosed a temperature of nearly 102! I was ashamed of myself, for I felt that I should have shown greater self-command. My serenity had fallen far short of what, as Sidney's wife, I ought to have shown.

I apologized to the doctor for the fact, and he raged at me.

"You can't get out of a vessel more than it will hold," he said scoldingly. "Every one of your organs is complaining to me of your ill-treatment—revealing how mercilessly you have been driving yourself all this winter."

"It's mostly my own fault," I confessed. "I ought to have put a stop from the first upon these experiments in the occult. They are not safe. You see, doctor, I did not give poor Ilianeff credit for being the expert he was. When he began flirting and making silly hypnotic experiments with a girl, I just took it for mere superficiality. On the surface he was a handsome young man on the make: engaged to a girl with some means, but quite ready, as it

appeared, to turn his thoughts elsewhere if it seemed advantageous. I under-valued him——"

"Yes, as all these selfish young people under-value you," he snapped. "Well, you'll have to take a holiday when this is over—a holiday, and no mistake about it—for weeks and weeks and weeks—hear that, Mrs. Z.?"

I took the draught he had mixed for me meekly enough. He went and called the luckless Teresa, who had but just tucked up and left Bella. She came without any demur when she saw my flushed cheeks and felt my hot hands.

"Leave her to me, doctor. I'll see to her," she assured him.

"By the by," said he as he washed his hands at my smart new "running-water" basin, "I nearly forgot! Before I go I must tell you something that will interest you, Madam! This ghastly business has put it out of my head! . . . You know, poor Ilianeff's symptoms at the hall this evening gave me profoundly to think. I felt sure in my own mind that there was some hidden reason for that uncanny seizure of his. Some memory kept irritating my brain, and on reaching home I went delving among my books on tropical medicines." Drawing out a pocket-book, he turned its pages. "Here it is! Knew I'd heard of the stuff somewhere. It's an African poison—most deadly thing. Repeated doses cause death. A single dose causes paralysis of initiative . . . and it has a most weird name"—glancing at his book he turned to me with a smile—"*Kingoliolo!* Can you beat it?"

That was the last, culminating straw, and it broke the camel's back! After all I had gone through that night! I quite simply fainted away!

CHAPTER XXV

MELISANDE'S EVIDENCE

I could not attend the inquest, for after that night of horror I was in bed several days in a high fever and knew little of what passed around me.

My absence was, however, of no importance, because I had already told Inspector Drew all I knew, and also Martin had been with me when we discovered the tragedy, and was able to give evidence which covered alike his proceedings and my own. Dr. Saunders handed in a medical certificate of my own complete unfitness to be present, and I was not even well enough to hear what had taken place until some days later.

It was an enormous relief to my mind that it was found practicable to prevent the least whisper of Martin's engagement from appearing in the papers. I had feared that it would be impossible to suppress it, but fortunately our Melisande's father, old Pumps himself, was our strenuous ally in this. He had been telegraphed for, and arrived as fast as a car could bring him, prepared to bluster to any extent. He was confronted at once, before the newspapers could get at him, by Mr. Willis of Willis and Mills, with the news of his daughter's marriage. The thing fairly staggered him. Nobody could doubt his having been in complete ignorance of it. He was a most unpleasant person, but one could not accuse him of being slow in the uptake. There was no need to dot i's and cross t's for his benefit. He saw clearly enough that his daughter and her husband could be prosecuted for fraudulent conspiracy, and that he

would certainly be cited with them if an action were brought. It was a question whether he or Martin was the more anxious to keep everything dark. He had been to prison once, and was struggling still against an unenviable reputation. It was most important to him that this discreditable story of his daughter should not come to light.

Meantime his son-in-law lay in the hospital between life and death, and Melisande was under strict police supervision.

Nobody could say when—or if ever—Finnegan would be able to speak. The injury to his brain was severe. Even if he recovered enough to testify, nobody knew what he would say—that is, nobody knew how far he would go in order to shield his wife. (Not to mention the fact that by the law of the land he could not give evidence against her.)

The Inspector was confident that he knew, and that Melisande also knew quite well, who the murderer was; but, in spite of everything, she clung obstinately to her determination to declare that she did not. She hoped against hope that Algie might never be able to give evidence, and perhaps also she trusted to some promise that may have been made to her that if she would keep her mouth shut she should be rewarded.

Her evidence at the inquest was most unsatisfactory. She tried all her armoury of angelic innocence and pearly tears. The newspapers published enormous photographs of her. Half the jury felt their hearts torn by her beauty and her woe; but a large section of the public were convinced that she knew, and was shielding the murderer. She contradicted herself repeatedly and, when taxed with her inconsistency, avowed that she had not been in a normal frame of mind since Professor Ilianeff practised on her. His influence was such that she was not a free agent.

She assured the Coroner that she was now quite prepared to speak the truth, and was very sorry that she had at first made erroneous statements to the Inspector.

The Coroner, deeply impressed at the outset by her beauty, took her along patiently from the time that she was put to bed by Teresa, somewhere about two o'clock on the fatal morning. What did she do then?

"Must I tell you?"

"Of course. It is of the utmost importance."

"I went downstairs to the winter-gardens. I—I thought Algie Finnegan might be there."

"Had you an appointment?"

"Not for that night specially. But he had come before—more than once."

"Indeed! A curious proceeding! Why the secrecy?"

"It was our only way to meet. Mr. Owen did not like Mr. Finnegan and would not invite him to the house; so we arranged this plan."

"And you expected him, in spite of the late hour?"

"More or less. I hoped he would not come——"

"Why so?"

"It was so dangerous," she faltered.

"I am informed that Mr. Finnegan is your husband?"

"That is so."

"But you were passing under your professional name of Miss Lebreton?"

"My maiden name. My father's name is Lebreton."

"I am told that the house-party at Savileas had not all gone to bed. How did you get to the winter-garden unseen?"

"I went down the stairs that lead to the back of the hall—to the large drawing-room. There was a

light in the hall, but everything was very quiet. I saw nobody. I had a torch."

"Tell us, please, just what you did?"

"I went through the two drawing-rooms. They had not been used that night. Nobody was there. The entrance to the winter-garden opens from the smaller drawing-room—the farther from the end at which I went in. Using only my torch to light me, I went into the winter-garden, walked across it, and found the little door they call the gardeners' door. I turned the key and opened it, softly, to see if Algie —Mr. Finnegan—was there. He usually waited just outside. There is a kind of enclosed courtyard there, and he could reach it by climbing over a wall. He was not there, and it was very cold indeed, so I closed the door without locking it, so that he could let himself in if he came, and went along to the central fountain near the radiator where we usually sat—— Professor Ilianeff was there."

"You were surprised to see him?"

"I was. He had followed me downstairs, he said, because he had to talk to me. By that time I felt pretty sure that it was too late for Mr. Finnegan to come. So I sat down by the Professor, and we talked."

"Will you tell us what he talked about?"

"He was terribly upset because of what had happened—because he had broken down at the Coronation Hall. He wanted to beg my pardon."

"Is that all he said?"

"All I can remember."

"Did he make any accusation against anybody?"

Melisande's voice strengthened. She had remembered that Rudolf was dead, and could never contradict any version she chose to give. "No. He made no accusation. We—we were talking about ourselves."

Here the pearly tears again came into action, and the Coroner said rather hurriedly, "Well—what happened next?"

"He—he—he was struck without warning from behind. There was a curious horrible, crunching sound; he tried to leap, to spring up, but instead of that he stayed still. He groaned or gasped in a sort of convulsion, and I got to my feet somehow. I think I screamed, though not very loud, but it was so —so perfectly awful——"

"You stood up. What did you see?"

"I saw a man standing there, and then I saw Algie Finnegan running towards me. I cried out to him, and he rushed up to us and seized hold of the—the murderer, who had some kind of a stick in his hand. He aimed a blow at Algie's head, and Algie threw up his arm to screen himself, and I heard him say, 'The devil! He's broken my arm!'"

"Is that all he said?"

"I—I don't remember."

"What happened then?"

"The murderer knocked him down, after they had struggled a bit, and then I—I ran away."

"Now, Mrs. Finnegan, you are on your oath—do you persist in your statement that you do not know who the murderer was?"

"Of course I do. I am a stranger here. How should I know one criminal from another? The police are more likely——"

"Then please give them all the help you can. They may recognize him if they know what he was like. Describe him—tall, short, dark, fair?"

"I don't know—only that he was big and violent."

"I understand that Professor Ilianeff had switched on a light when you sat down to talk. You must have seen this man's face quite plainly."

"No—no—I did not see his face."

"How can that be?"

"He was wearing a mask—a little black mask that hid most of his face."

Drew shrugged his shoulders and murmured to the Superintendent, "That's something quite new. Rather clever! No one can contradict her; but it's the first time we've heard of it."

The coroner was persistent. "What kind of hat had he?"

"Had he a hat?"

"I'm asking you. You saw him."

"I've no notion whether he had a hat or not. Do you suppose I stood there staring at him? I thought he was going to attack me, and I ran away, as I told you."

"At least you saw his weapon. With what did he deal that terrible blow?"

"It—it looked like an iron bar—or a stick, a long stick."

"No stick, no bludgeon, could have inflicted such a wound—smashing a man's skull like an eggshell. Can you describe it more fully?"

"No—no! I tell you I was panic-stricken."

"Did you run away and leave him there with his victims?"

"He ran away too, among the trees, out of sight."

"By way of the gardeners' door?"

"I don't know, I didn't see. I ran straight down the wide alley to the drawing-room doors——"

"You ask us to believe that you really did this? A wretch was there who had already killed one man and was busy killing a second, but he allowed you to escape. You knew—you confess you knew—that the household were not all in bed. There were still lights in the house; and you ask us to belive that you ran upstairs without attempting to summon help—

that you left your husband to be murdered and went off to bed?"

"I thought he was dead"—sobbing a little—"he said something like—'Run girl; it's all up with me!' I thought the man was going to kill me too, and I fled. I know I'm not brave, but I was beside myself with terror."

"I put it to you, Mrs. Finnegan, that you knew the murderer, and that he ordered you to run away and say nothing?"

She denied this, earnestly and with vehemence. No pressing made her change her story. She had lied, prevaricated, and altered her statements on most other points, but she stuck to it that she did not know who the murderer was.

I have collected these questions and answers from the newspaper accounts of the inquest. This is not a detective story, and I have no intention of giving a complete account of the police procedure.

With Finnegan unconscious and Canning out of the country, they could go no further at present, and proceedings were accordingly adjourned to give time for the police to continue their investigations.

We were a much smaller party at Savileas, for the Squadron-Leader had been obliged to depart, his leave being ended. Melisande was with her father in rooms at Baxted, and poor Rudolf was gone, never to return.

I mourned his loss very sincerely, for I knew that I had not treated him quite fairly; and as the mists cleared from my mind and I grew stronger, I felt that it was my duty to reveal to the others—that is to say, to Dr. Saunders, Ted, Trix, Martin, and Melian—the experiences I had had with regard to Rudolf, and especially his last communication to me, uttered when he was at the point of death.

It was matter for regret so strong that I could almost

call it remorse, that a man with such powers should have been ship-wrecked by an unworthy passion. I kept on tormenting myself with wonder as to whether I could have stopped it all. Surely, after his second apparition I ought to have gone to him and told him—warned him—that he was throwing away a marvellous gift, all for the sake of " a rag and a bone and a hank of hair ".

Would he have taken any heed? Who could say? Anyway, it was all too late now.

The day of his funeral was to me a day of futile unhappiness.

There is a Crematorium at Baxted, and his body was reduced to ashes there. Melian made all the arrangements, and did not falter until all was over. He had never been a Christian, and there was no attempt to give him Christian burial nor to deposit his ashes in consecrated ground. All I could do to help was to lend them some rather beautiful Buddhist prayers which had belonged to Sidney. I could not go out—in fact I was still upstairs, a good deal to Bella's resentment; for since she was confined to her own room with shock, it was only seemly that I should be about and able to cope with household routine; but Bella was up against Dr. Saunders, and he was keeping a tight grip on me, taking unfair advantage of having got me at his mercy for the first time in many years!

In spite of him, I made a rapid convalescence, and in little more than a week I issued an invitation to Dr. Saunders and the young people to come to tea in my sitting-room.

I hardly thought that Melian would feel equal to coming, but she avowed herself quite fit, and seemed fully in command of her emotions. She is really rather a fine person, and I was full of sympathy with her. I asked Dr. Saunders to time his visit that day

so as to be with us at tea; and hinted that there was something I specially wished to communicate to them all.

When I began to speak of it all, I found it harder than I had foreseen; but Melian helped me out, quietly but effectively. She said that I had asked her, quite at the beginning of her visit—before Rudolf came—not to tell him that I was Sidney's widow, nor that I had any psychic powers. She had been sorry for this, but had bowed to my wish. Dr. Saunders explained to her how strong had been my husband's feeling that I ought not to meddle in any occult dealings, on account of the danger to the occidental mind, which never can fully understand the oriental viewpoint.

I owned that at first I had misjudged Rudolf. Perhaps his good looks misled me. His readiness to flirt, his tendency to show off, all helped to make me sceptical of his vocation.

Melian at once said that she was not surprised. She had noticed a dreadful change in him as soon as he came under the spell of the poison of Melisande's influence. But he was a true sensitive, and a genuine graduate in oriental mysticism. "He was from the first attracted oddly by Mrs. Zangula," she added. "Only I would not let him talk about her, because I knew she did not wish it. Also, of course, as the days went on, he was sinking more and more into what I can only describe as his *Venusberg*. He was enslaved."

"For all that," I sighed, "his sub-conscious wished to know me better. It was fully aware of a link between us which he could not understand. You must not pooh-pooh what I am going to say, because it really happened, and I am going to give you proof of that before I have done. Rudolf appeared to me in my room one night and made a desperate appeal to

me to respond. I withstood him with all my force. I thought of nothing but my promise to Sidney; I cared nothing at all for Rudolf Ilianeff. I just pretended to be wholly unconscious of his presence."

On this avowal I was besieged by a tremendous battery of questions, and answered them to the best of my ability. I knew it was an apparition, I felt sure that in his normal waking moments Rudolf himself would be unconscious of what he had done: "As unconscious as Martin was, the evening when Rudolf started to hypnotize him——"

"What?" cried Martin sharply.

"Yes. That made me very uneasy. You were playing cards with Ian, and Rudolf willed you to get up and throw a log on the hall fire——"

"Onnie, I never did such a thing!——"

"Oh yes, you did. I saw you," attested Melian.

It was some minutes before we could make Martin believe that he had really done Rudolf's unspoken behest. "Put a log on the hall fire! I never did such a thing in my life," he reiterated.

"You write and ask Ian if you did not. It surprised him very much," I went on. "I did not like it at all; I thought he might will you to do something much more important, and that it was dangerous. It was Melisande who was egging him on, of course. She was delighted when you did it."

"You really mean this, Onnie?"

I assured him that I did. "I began then to consider seriously whether I should say anything to Rudolf about it, only things happened so fast, it went out of my thoughts—— But I saw him again—I mean his apparition—that night that you and Trix, Martin, were rehearsing very late, and met me in the corridor: the night that you went and looked out of the window and saw a ladder at Melisande's bedroom window. You were both conscious of his presence in a way—

said a cold draught swept by you. He passed so close to Trix he almost touched her—— He was on his way, I have little doubt, to Melisande's room. He wanted to warn her. His inner sensitiveness perceived that the loved one was in danger. Somehow or other he did contrive to warn her, so that Finnegan decamped before we could catch him. I saw him come back to his own room. That was the second time, but the third time I saw him—the third time he appeared to me—was when he was in the very act of dying —and if he had not made that appearance, I should not have thought of going into the winter-garden, and the murders would not have been discovered until morning."

I then described, quite simply, how I had fallen into an uneasy exhausted nap, sitting in the hall, watching over old Colonel Bird, and how I suddenly found myself awake and saw Rudolf standing before me, just in front of the drawing-room door.

"I sprang up and went to him, only to realize that it was his apparition. He was trying to speak to me —to tell me something—and manifestly struggling against great difficulties. He said it was too late, but that there was one word I was not to forget, because it was terribly important. He pronounced the word, and it sounded to me like raving nonsense. I thought I was asleep and should wake up to find I had been dreaming. But he looked so imploring as he faded from my sight that I did just as he bade me. My own memorandum book was lying close by, and there and then I wrote the word down——"

"And the word was——?"

"You shall see what it was. Please, I want you all to note that *I have not been down into the hall since that night.* The word lies there, where I wrote it, and I want Dr. Saunders to be certain that it was already written down by me when he told me—much

later—after the crime had been discovered—when he said to me a word that so amazed me that I fainted away."

Dr. Saunders was at a loss. "What's that you say? What word? I had no idea that anything I said caused you to faint——"

"Please, Ted," I begged, "go down and fetch my little notebook off the table near the pillar at the front of the hall."

"By the small drawing-room door?"

"That's it."

He did not take long to go and return. When he handed me the book I opened it at once and the word stared up at me.

"Look at it, Doctor, and you'll remember," I said.

. . . And Dr. Saunders, having fixed his eyes upon what I had written, cried out:

"Good God!"

CHAPTER XXVI KINGOLIOLO

I WATCHED the doctor's face eagerly. "You know that you had but just said that word to me? You can swear if necessary to the time when I fainted?"

"Of course, of course, my dear——"

"Then take this testimony, which was written down more than two hours earlier. It must have been Rudolf that I saw, was it not?"

"But what was the word?" they asked me breathlessly.

The doctor answered for me. "That word—Kingoliolo—is the name of the poisonous African drug which Mr. Canning must have administered to Professor Ilianeff. I had heard of it before, so I looked it up after he left the hospital, and wrote it down for the benefit of Mrs. Zangula."

Nobody said anything at all for some time.

"It looks," remarked Ted at last, "as though Rudolf himself had secured his revenge after death. This wonderful story certainly seems to link Canning with the doings in the winter-garden."

"*Canning!*" cried Trix incredulously. "Never!—you don't suspect him of the—*murder*—surely?"

"Drew does. Always has," said Ted shortly. "But when we found Canning, he certainly was carrying no weapon; and he was a long way from the scene of action. It seems to me wildly unlikely."

"He hated Rudolf," I said slowly.

"How do you know that, Onnie?"

"Just watching him. I expect you know that he is an old friend of Melisande?"

"Now you speak of it—yes. I remember he said something of their having met before."

"I am sure they were closely connected," I affirmed. "Either he deserted her or she deserted him, I don't know which. Anyway, when they met again, all the old glamour at once revived. Of course he did not know that she was married, and to the best of my belief he did not look upon Finnegan as a serious rival. But he was flamingly jealous of Rudolf, because he could see the ascendancy he had obtained. He felt that Melisande was a tool in the Professor's hands, and he hated all the publicity and the exhibitionism! He may have intended to marry her; in any case, he loathed seeing her exploited by another man, and more than once he could hardly control himself—when he saw them together, he must have lost his head—and he had a formidable weapon in his hand——"

"Had he?"

"I'm convinced he had! Listen. This is what I believe must have happened!—Canning set out to track a man across the park. It is almost certain that he knew, when he left the car, who it was that he was following. Finnegan and he were both at Baxted 'Drome; they knew each other quite well, didn't they? Finnegan made straight for his goal, and Canning was close behind him. He is an expert tracker, and must have reached the little door almost as soon as the other man—who probably had no idea he was being followed—but Finnegan, when he slipped inside the winter-garden, was very wary. He saw there was a light—perhaps the murmur of voices reached him. Melisande, on the occasions when she had let him in, usually waited for him by the door. She was not there. He must always have gone in deadly fear of being caught, so he decided not to reveal himself until he had spied out

who was present, and he kept out of sight, prepared to bolt if necessary. Anyway, when Canning entered, he was not to be seen. Canning, however, had no intention of concealment. He too saw a light and perhaps—heard a murmuring. He had not much doubt as to who it was that Finnegan had come to meet. He made straight for the fountain and saw the two, with their backs turned to him as he advanced: Rudolf, whom he had believed to be out of action, and Melisande in his embrace! In blind fury he raised the crow-bar or whatever it was he carried and struck instantly. The girl screamed—the man came running; and Canning, in horror, realized that he had not only committed murder, but that there were *two witnesses*! Melisande could be squared. But Finnegan could not! In self-defence he must kill him too! He did so, or thought he had done, and then proceeded to threaten, cajole, or coerce Melisande—who can tell what he said or did? But he must have made certain before bolting that she would not give him away . . . how does that strike you?"

"Well," objected Ted; "but I tell you when we found Canning he was carrying nothing at all, let alone a crow-bar."

"Of course not. He had had plenty of time to dispose of it. You say you met him down by the lake. Ask Drew if he has thought of searching there."

"Couldn't possibly have thrown it in, Onnie dear," said Martin. "The ice was inches thick."

"Oh," cut in Trix, "but at the top where the brook runs in it is always a bit slushy. Where was Canning when you saw him?"

"Difficult to say. It was pitch dark. We flashed our lights and called, and all of a sudden he replied. We were down by the lake-side path, and he came along it—yes, he did come from the upper end——"

"It's my belief that the whole thing was frozen stiff," put in Martin. "The brook was ice the whole way down."

"Suppose he took a big stone and crashed it down so as to make a hole in the ice and pushed in his bar, the whole thing would have frozen over by daylight," mused Ted. "But it would leave a scar—one would be able to tell if the ice had been disturbed."

"Put Drew and his men on to it," said Melian.

"Of course," said Trix, "Onnie's vision of Rudolf would not be evidence, but surely a crow-bar would——"

"It's beginning to dawn on me," went on Ted, "that Canning is the most likely suspect. It was someone our Melisande knew quite well, and who else could that be? You know, Canning had been gone for quite an hour when the Colonel gave the alarm. The whole thing must have been over long before then. He could easily have slipped out, gone down to the lake, and done his stuff. Remember he has several times flown over our grounds, and he's a trained observer. He knew where the water was, right enough——"

"But, Ted," I objected, "Melisande didn't come into the house until just a minute or two before Martin and I appeared on the scene. We heard her run upstairs. The times don't tally."

"H'm, yes. That's a bit of a snag. But there are ways of accounting for it. Canning may have ordered her not to budge until he had had time for his get-away. No, I don't think that was the reason for her delayed action—I have it! The point was that she was trapped. When she crept to the door of the big drawing-room and opened it, ever so softly, she found, to her terror, that people were still about—I think you told me, Onnie, that you

went round the house a bit after we started on our midnight foray——"

"Yes, I did. I went all over the place—upstairs and down, into the kitchens and right through the back premises. But the idea of the winter-garden did not occur to me until after I had seen Rudolf, so, like a dolt, I did not go into the drawing-rooms——"

"Good! Anyway, she heard doors open and shut—people talking. She must have waited with her heart in her mouth for those lights to go out. She knew it was unlikely that anybody would enter the drawing-rooms, so she stayed there as long as she dared. At last she felt she could delay no longer. Somehow or other she *must* reach her room. So she waited until all sound of movement ceased and made a desperate sortie——"

As he was speaking, Dixon entered. She addressed me.

"Colonel Bird has called, ma'am, and would much like to see you."

Ted jumped up. "Bird! Just the man we want! May he come up, Onnie? He can tell us what weapon, if any, Canning took with him when he ran off."

"The Colonel asked me to say that he won't keep you long, but he is so anxious to see Mrs. Zangula and to thank her for her goodness to him when he came knocking in the small hours," said Dixon, with a smile.

"Tell him to come up at once. I expect he knows I can't come down," I told her; and by the time we had rearranged chairs a little, our old friend was ushered in.

He apologized for coming so soon after our troubles, and said, most courteously, that he was charged with many messages from all at Broadlands to tell us how

horrified they had been by the shocking news of our tragedy. He inquired meticulously after Bella, and was not surprised to hear that the shock had confined her to her bed. Moreover, he told us—what we already knew—that the news had horrified the whole countryside and was the main topic of conversation.

We admitted that we were only too keenly aware of that. I said a few words upon my own regrets that I had not set my foot down firmly to prevent any dabbling with the occult.

One or two declared that I was not to blame.

"But I was," I maintained, "because I knew the danger, and the rest of you only thought it a kind of joke."

"Not me," said Melian.

"No, not you," murmured Trix, taking her hand.

Our visitor was most sympathetic, and told us he had stopped his car at the Cottage Hospital on his way to Savileas in order to bring us the very latest bulletin of Finnegan. It was perhaps a shade more hopeful. The patient was still completely unconscious, and no immediate change was expected; but the doctors said he was holding his own, and thought he might come round eventually.

"What a night that was!" went on the old man with a sigh. "I was so done up that I hardly remember what happened when Lionel drove me home! He never said a word of the tragedy to me, knowing that I was, as you may say, all in."

"Yes. He was most anxious that you should not be told," I replied, "and I thought he was right—you would know soon enough."

"Colonel," said Ted, leaning forward earnestly, "will you throw your memory back a bit to the scene in the drive when Lionel ran off and left you? Describe to us as closely as you can the *appearance*

of the man you saw, and where he went, and so on——"

"Why, of course I will; but the police have already taken me through it, and I don't fancy I can add much to your own knowledge. One small thing I *have* thought of since, and it is this. I think the intruder had the intention, not of *crossing* the drive, but of turning *up* it—towards the house. He was probably startled on seeing the car, so changed his direction, swerved, and ran across to hide himself in the wood."

"That's a point, certainly. To get to the back of the house he would have to follow the drive for a certain distance, and then strike off to his right among the back premises and climb a wall."

"That's what he did as soon as he was out of earshot, no doubt," chimed in Trix.

"Well, now, go on—tell us what Canning did as exactly as you can——"

He obeyed, describing once more how Canning got out, and how he said he thought he had better take some kind of weapon.

"That's what we want to know"—eagerly—"what did he take?"

Evidently surprised at the question, the Colonel replied that it was something belonging to the car—something he took from under the driver's seat.

"A spanner?" suggested Ted.

"Er—no—it was not a spanner: not that shape—longer than that; but I didn't take particular notice. Why do you want to know?" he asked in a puzzled way.

Ted gave an evasive reply. He said no weapon had been found, and it seemed just possible that Canning might have dropped it somewhere and the murderer picked it up and used it.

"I don't see how that could be, as Lionel was

never in the winter-garden—he lost his way, and his man, you know," said our old friend, rather helplessly.

However, he was easily diverted from the point, because he had come full of the liveliest curiosity respecting Melisande. We were rather glad to have the opportunity to give him what I may describe as the official version, and he was deeply interested. He was a naughty old gossip, but very truthful, and we felt that what we told him would go the rounds forthwith.

"And so she called here and picked up an invitation upon no better grounds than that young Rhodes had boarded in her father's hotel for some months, and she happened to find herself in the neighbourhood? Well, well! We live in a free-and-easy world!"

I explained to him that the young lady had not come expecting to stay, but had merely been invited to lunch; but that almost at once Professor Ilianeff had discovered her exceptional powers as a medium, so that the invitation was extended.

"Forgive the question, Mrs. Zangula, but are you sure there was no collusion between her and Ilianeff?"

"I can answer that question," said Melian incisively. "Rudolf and I had been engaged to be married for nearly four months, and I know for a fact that she was a complete stranger to him."

The Colonel looked dubious, but had to accept this assurance.

"Besides," went on Melian, "the Professor himself did not know he was coming here until that very day. He was most hospitably invited at short notice, and Ted Owen flew in his 'plane and brought him here. He had no intention at all of exploiting his psychic powers until he met Captain Gardner, who begged him to do so. I understand that In-

spector Drew was suspicious about Miss Lebreton being an accomplice, but facts are too strong for him. The Professor never displayed his powers in public. He consented to this out of the kindness of his heart. It was quite an exception." She mentioned the post held by Ilianeff in his country's legation.

As soon as the Colonel had taken his departure, we rang up Inspector Drew, who duly came to hear what we had to say. We told him about my vision, and the fact that I had there and then written down the name of the drug I had never heard of. He could not help being impressed, but he was more so by the suggestion of seeking the crow-bar in the lake.

"I have a pretty good suspicion on that head," he told us, "and this confirms it. I believe that what Mr. Canning took with him was the starting-handle belonging to the car. At least, there is not one to be found, as we discovered more or less accidentally. His car was locked in the little garage at The Digs. He had not taken it with him to the 'Drome when he flew off that morning, because he did not want to leave it there. He rang up for them to send him a car, and his own was left behind. We asked the Colonel's leave to use it, when we wanted to test distances and speed—a question of timing, really. . . . It was bitter cold in that little garage, and we found that we could not start the engine. Then, when we went to look for the starting-handle, it was not there. That seemed odd, in a nearly new and well-found car. But I must own," he added in a vexed tone, "that I had not thought about the lake. You may feel pretty certain that's where it is, and we'll go and have a look at once."

"What's a starting-handle like?" asked Melian.

"It's a long, heavy metal rod with a kind of

elbow in it, Miss. It would deal a terrific blow. I think there's not much doubt that Mr. Canning hit a great deal harder than he intended——"

"You think it was certainly he—that he is the murderer," gasped Trix.

"To my mind it's a moral certainty, Miss; but a moral certainty doesn't amount to much when it comes to evidence: and even if we prove it against him, I don't know how we shall lay our hands on him. Did I tell you where he is?"

"No—tell us, do——"

"He's in Africa, Miss—right in the heart of it, a place I never heard of before—it means the Kingdom of the Snakes. The Government declines to interfere to get him brought out, because they don't want any trouble with the natives of that place. It appears he's under their special protection, and that he's the only white man who has ever been made free of the tribe, except one American missionary some years ago——"

Just as he was rising to take leave, the Inspector suddenly bethought him of something he had meant to show us. He produced an envelope, addressed to Martin Rhodes, but not sealed nor fastened up in any way. It was a good deal rubbed, as though it had been carried about in a pocket, but the Inspector said he felt sure I should like to see it. It had been found on Finnegan, and the police had possessed themselves of it.

I read it with the greatest interest. Whether poor Algie had ever really intended that it should reach Martin, it is difficult to say. He probably wrote it by way of a threat to hold over Melisande's head. But into it he had poured the bitterness of his soul, and he freely and frankly confessed to the fraud the two had planned against Martin.

He must have gone straight home, after the after-

noon when he surprised Lionel and Melisande together, and added an account of what he heard her say and saw her do on that occasion. No doubt, although she had pacified him for a time, he was very far from feeling sure that she had told him the truth. He probably knew, in the way that men do know, without analysing their feelings, that she no longer loved her husband. He likewise felt fairly sure that their brilliant plan for raising money had come unstuck. In that letter he had as it were laid bare the deep wounds in his heart, his lacerated pride. I felt terribly sorry for him as I read.

I likewise felt positive that, Canning, Martin, Rudolf, and Algie, having all been disposed of, Melisande would find someone else before her charms faded. As I pondered, Drew came to his feet and took leave.

"I doubt if we ever get Canning," he said morosely, "but, for my own satisfaction, I am going to find that starting-handle if I can."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE PLACE OF FOOLS

It may here be said that the starting-handle—a most formidable weapon—was duly found in the mud at the lake bottom. Moreover, there were traces, as Ted had thought probable there would be, of a wound in the thick ice where it had been pushed in.

On that evidence the airman could have been arrested, if he had been anywhere get-at-able; but to send men to the heart of a snake-infested country to fetch him back, was an expense to be considered; more particularly as the Government, far from giving any assistance in the matter, plainly said that they did not wish him disturbed. They inferred that after he had done his job, proceedings might be taken against him, but that he might as well finish it first.

For a time there was endless talk, and people wrote letters to the papers, which for days were filled with comments. Rudolf was not a nobody, by any means; but Jugo-Slavia is not a nation with an unlimited power of making itself felt among its fellows. The League of Nations seemed inclined to take the matter up, but nothing came of it. It looked as if the wizard would die unavenged.

By very slight degrees we found the affair slipping insensibly into the background of our own minds.

After more than three weeks of hovering between life and death, Algie Finnegan came back to some kind of consciousness, but it was found that his mind had been permanently impaired. He was not exactly idiotic, but he was lethargic, had no memory,

and seemed only half aware of the world around him. At first some further improvement was thought likely, but the hope proved delusive. It became apparent that although Melisande's husband might live to be an old man, he would never earn his living again.

One could hardly have wished for a more signal punishment for his wife. Under certain restrictions she was allowed to go back to Darnley with her father; and they took the invalid with them, rather, it is to be feared, because everyone would have been so horrified if they had not done so, than because of a sense of duty.

Melisande would have placed him in a mental home had it not been that she was totally unable to meet the expense.

However, the laws of her country will enable her to cut free from her bondage before long, so we may dry our tears of sympathy. Our now paramount interest was in the forthcoming marriage of Martin and Trix, which was to take place immediately after Easter. Her father-in-law was so delighted with his bonny new daughter that it was quite pathetic to see his pleasure; and it was decided that for a time at least the young folks should make their home with him, in the big old house which they would be able to improve and adorn.

Ted felt rather bitter about Canning's getting off scot-free; and the fact that everyone in the neighbourhood believed him to have been the murderer made relations between ourselves and the Bird family a little strained.

* * * * *

It was above five months after the murder that one morning a package arrived for me by post, the postmark on which was Kenya.

We knew nobody in Kenya, as it happened, and I wondered who was my correspondent.

There were several sheets of thin paper, fastened together at the top left-hand corner with a piece of fibre.

The heading was puzzling. Right across the top of the sheet was written in bold block letters:

THE PLACE OF FOOLS

"DEAR MRS. ZANGULA" (the letter began),

"I find it hard to explain the urge that leads me to write to you. This is the last communication that I shall ever have the chance to make. Even now a mist is beginning to form over my eyes, the temples of my head throb, and my mind is apt to dissolve, as one might say, and allow my various ideas to float off in confusion.

"This awful place from which I write is not far from the great Ugala river in the secret kingdom of the Wanyamwesi, or People of the Snakes.

"I want you to know the truth, lest you may think that I go unpunished. Believe me, nothing could be more terrible than the price I am paying for what I did to Rudolf Ilianeff. . . . Did you ever read *The Light of Asia*, and, if so, do you remember these lines:

"The books say well, my brothers—each man's life
The outcome of his former living is.
The bygone wrong brings forth sorrow and strife,
The bygone right breeds bliss.

"Some years ago, as a young, energetic pioneer and seeker after knowledge, I succeeded in penetrating into the domains of the Snake-people. They are very suspicious of white men, but I was lucky enough to obtain the friendship of the old coal-black Emperor—a wonderful fellow. He grew to

love me—really love me; and his regard was worth having, for he is one of the best men I have ever known. After long probation and much hesitation on his part, he consented at last that I should be initiated into the mysteries of the Snake-people—the first white man to be so honoured. I had to have a proxy, as I could not have endured the tortures of initiation; though some of it was actually inflicted on me personally, as you would know if you saw my scarred body.

"This letter can't be a very long one, so I must not go into details. I learned a great many things that westerners would say were nonsense, but I know better. My actual knowledge is, however, not the point. The thing I must emphasize with all my power is this.

"I was required, on initiation, to take a solemn oath and vow that *never would I use my magic powers for any unworthy purpose.*

"I took that oath; and, as you know, I have broken it.

"How did the Emperor find out that I had done so? I cannot tell you.

"The breaking of my oath did not trouble me at all until I got here. Over in Europe it weighed very lightly. I was possessed with the one idea that if I could escape to this country—back into the secret company of the Snake-worshippers, among my blood-brothers, the Wanyamwesi—I should be safe. I could not be arrested nor punished.

"*Not punished*—oh, my God!

"They welcomed me at first with a good deal of joy at my return, but I could not help fancying that they were disturbed, more than I used to think was the case, by having a white man in their secret partnership.

"I awoke one morning to find that seated on the

ground beside my hammock was the old *Mwitangala*, or medicine-man. He was very busy making a round thing that looked like a great mud-pie, and was most particular to knead it to exactly the right consistency. I asked him jokingly what he was about, to which he replied reprovingly that this was very serious indeed. Rising to his feet, he placed one foot plank into the midst of the mud-pie, where it made a huge footprint. Pointing to it, with something menacing in his voice, he said :

" ' That is the Place of Fools, and the footprint is the sign of Limsasi the Fool-killer. He seizes all fools who violate our sacred laws and drives them west—ever west—until they go crazy and die.'

" I said—hoping that I kept the mockery out of my voice :

" ' Am I a fool, oh Great One ? '

" His smouldering eyes dwelt on me for one awful instant. ' That you will find out,' he said, and, having spoken, he turned and left me, nor have I ever seen him since."

At this point the handwriting of the document became like that of a man who is either drunk or enfeebled ; irregular and sprawling.

" Limsasi is driving me," said the next sentence. " It is no deception. He drives me, and I have to walk. My devoted servant Kifinda goes with me, but he cannot check me. I never am able to stay more than a few hours in the same place. . . . I have implored him to imprison me, to do something to stop this Wandering Jew act. He says he cannot. . . .

* * * * *

" *Some days later.* I no longer keep count of time. I am going rapidly crazy. But Kifinda has sworn to me that when I am dead he will see that this letter is posted, so, if he is alive, it will be. . . . This morning,

on awaking, the first thing I saw was a huge mud-pie with a footprint stamped upon it. I asked Kifinda if he had made it, and he earnestly denied it, protesting that he did not know how it came there. . . . The Place of Fools ! Oh, what a death for a man in his prime, with all his faculties unimpaired, to suffer ! A good, swift English hanging would be nothing to this long-drawn-out agony ! . . ."

* * * * *

To this succeeded some indecipherable scrawls, and below was this :

" I do not think I shall be able to write much more. Madness is gaining on me. So I will sign my name here, as legibly as I can, in token that I myself have written thus far. None of these natives know my European name, or could write it down if he did."

This sentence was so badly written that it took some time to decipher. Below appeared three attempts to write a signature. The third time was the best. " Lionel Canning " could be deciphered.

Below that again was something that I think was intended for the word " Good-bye."

* * * * *

. . . And that was all.

The magic this man had invoked in order to do evil had recoiled upon his own head.

Of course I allowed Colonel Bird to see the document. At first he and all his family were much inclined to reject it as spurious. Inquiries were set on foot by them, quite fruitless at first.

Some time later a party of young Englishmen on *safari* from Kenya were shown the ruins of an aeroplane lying not far from Tabora, near a native settlement. There was nothing whatever in it; but its number and make, painted in its wings, sufficed to identify it as the one that Lionel Canning had flown.

It had certainly not been crashed—in fact it was rather carefully parked—but the climate and the depredations of the white ant and other pests had had their way with it.

No native could say—at least, they could not be induced to say—what had become of its owner.

The party had with them, however, a member of a medical mission, who knew the old Emperor. He went to see him, and was solemnly told that the Englishman who owned that 'plane had been trusted by the Emperor and had betrayed that trust.

He had expiated his treachery, and was dead. Unfortunately his body-servant, Kifinda, was also dead : he had been killed in a quarrel with a fellow-tribesman over the possession of such things as the Englishman had left behind him.

Nobody seemed to know what had become of those things. Nobody knew where their owner was buried.

Over his fate an impenetrable veil of mystery hovered.

But Kifinda had managed the posting of that letter before his own end. There was no reason at all to question the authenticity of the message. The Birds recognized the handwriting in its earlier stages, before the madness grew upon the writer, as being undoubtedly his own.

* * * * *

"Talk about Euripides or Æschylus," remarked Ted as we sat upon the lawn in the sunshine, one late summer's day when Trix and her husband had come to spend a week-end with us. "This is really a clear case of the Retribution of Transgressors—isn't it, Onnie?"

"All three of them," I answered dreamily. "Rudolf—Lionel—and also, I am glad to say, the woman who

lured them on. I don't think I could have borne it if Melisande had not been punished too."

"She's having a ghastly time just now, according to the account from a chap at Darnley the other day," said Martin. "It appears that Algie has attacks of violent rage, in which he knocks her about. However, they are selling the hotel and moving elsewhere, and I understand that he is to be sent to the County Mental Home. Poor chap! He's having more than his fair share of punishment, one feels."

"Well, my dear lad, he was party to her blackmailing act with you as victim," said Trix. "I don't want to be vindictive, but I think he got what was coming to him."

"I shall always have a feeling of guilt about it all," I sighed remorsefully. "I ought to have been quite firm about it when Noel first mooted his plan. Nothing is so dangerous as to meddle with things that one only half understands. Sidney was right about that. Experiment with the occult is always dangerous."

"Since knowledge is but sorrow's spy
It is not safe to know,"

quoted Melian softly.

Upon which my sister Bella, who had been sitting dozing in the sun under the great beech, suddenly spoke.

"There's something better than knowledge," said she clearly, "and it is—love! If we had more of that, life would not be so sad."

"Therefore give us love!" muttered Ted by way of an Amen.

THE END